

# AN ELUSIVE ARCHIVE

## Three Trans Men and Photographic Recollection

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## DECLARATION

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Date 2013-02-18



## ABSTRACT

The archive as mnemonic device and taxonomic structure plays a significant role in the visualisation of identity. This thesis draws on the example of the personal photographic archives of three trans men to suggest ways of understanding archives as discursive and visual practices through which fluctuating narratives of self can be uncovered, traced, erased, renegotiated and fictionalised. This thesis considers how these participants negotiate the roles of author, archivist and photographer in the creation of their personal photographic archives, and how such archives intersect with discourses on the social, somatic and political.

## OPSOMMING

Die argief speel as beide 'n mnemoniese apparaat en 'n taksonomiese struktuur 'n beduidende rol in die voorstelling van identiteit. In hierdie tesis word die fotografiese argiewe van drie trans mans bespreek om maniere voor te stel waarop argiewe as diskursiewe en visuele praktyke funksioneer waardeur veranderlike narratiewe van self ontbloot, nagespoor, uitgewis, heroorweeg en verbeel kan word. Hierdie studie oorweeg die manier waarop hierdie deelnemers die rolle van outeur, argivaris en fotograaf onderhandel tydens die skep van hul persoonlike fotografiese argiewe, sowel as die wyse waarop hierdie argiewe as kruispunte dien waar diskoerse rondom die sosiale, liggaamlike en politiese bymekaarkom.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated, with much respect, to Robert, Charl and Munir.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Much love and appreciation to Michael, my parents and my brother for their support and understanding. Many thanks to my supervisors, Stella Viljoen and Shaun Viljoen, for their guidance and enthusiasm. I also wish to thank the Harry Crossley Foundation for their financial support and Stellenbosch University for granting me research leave.

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## CHAPTER 1

### AN INTRODUCTION

To commence an archive, or a thesis for that matter, is not an easy process. It calls for a sense of purpose and control that is, at the outset of such projects, often more imagined than real. In this sense, to commence is a gesture, like taking a finger and tracing an imaginary circle, and anticipating something to arise from this invisible space. But introductions are also conclusions as they are often written in retrospect, after a project has been completed; at least, this one was written that way. So the perimeter that was obsessively drawn as this dissertation took shape has left some tangible traces by now – the archive is *here*, this introduction suggests, decisions have been made, things were collected and interpreted and recorded, a thesis was written. While imaginary circles tend to lose their shape as soon as a finger stops tracing them, an introduction to a thesis supposes that an archive of knowledge actually exists, and that something that is known to an author can now also be known by a reader.

Despite the fact that archives and introductions assume a level of control over a subject matter, this thesis was born out of an interest in archival gestures that are never completely knowable, traceable or discernible. My interest in the archive as mnemonic device and taxonomic structure is specifically geared towards forms of personal recollection that exist outside (or at the edge) of official, institutionalised and/or state-sanctioned archival structures. As an aspect of the knowledge economy, the idea of ‘archive’ is entrenched by discourses of disclosure and justified belief. At the same time, the archive has also been sedimented in popular rhetoric as synonymous with processes of recollection – as Okwui Enwezor maintains, “so thoroughly has the archive been domesticated that it has come to serve as a shorthand for memory” (2008: 35). This thesis straddles an understanding of archives both as sources of history (or rather, histories) and as a rhetoric for recollection by being concerned with forms of personal and often private archiving through which varying degrees of exposure and authority are granted to the processes and holdings that comprise such collections.

As the subject of this study into personal forms of archival recollection, a process was facilitated whereby three trans men were asked to select specific photographs from their personal photographic collections as an archive of their own making. For the purpose of this study, these participants chose to be identified by their personal names – Robert, Munir

and Charl.<sup>1</sup> They also preferred to be identified as trans men within this thesis, even though they might use other terms to identify themselves in everyday society.<sup>2</sup> At the time when I started with my research, all the participants worked for a local trans advocacy and support group called *Genderdynamix*. I first met Robert at a conference on African lgbti (lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender and intersex) identities in his capacity as Advocacy Manager of this support group, during which I talked to him about my interest in personal photographic archives. As a professional photographer and a self-identified trans activist, Robert was interested in my project as a tool for creating awareness about local trans identities, and he was willing to participate by sharing and talking about his personal photographic collection. Robert also identified other trans men whom he knew through *Genderdynamix* and he asked them whether they would be willing to meet with me. It so happened that Charl and Munir were the first to contact me and after meeting them and talking about their relationship with photography, I decided that my thesis would be delineated so as to focus on the personal archives of these three participants. The process that informed my selection of these personal archives was, from the outset, an idiosyncratic one – I never tried to locate a specific ‘type’ of trans person to write on but, as I met each of these individuals and our relationship developed, my thesis started to centre on ideas around trans masculinity as a complex site of empowerment and vulnerability.

At the start of this research project, Robert, Munir and Charl were asked to consider their own personal photographic collections as archives of some sort; that is, as a compilation of records that, in conjunction with their narrative accounts, provide information about their identities and lives. This project thus presented a platform for imagining and constructing

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<sup>1</sup> All the participants were given the option to use a pseudonym, yet they all preferred to use their real names. This decision is a strategic one and it is largely based on the idea that these names are reflective of their current status as males, and that to change their names in this thesis would imply some form of dislocation from their chosen identities. At the same time, the participants are also aware that these names, as well as the images that they include in this thesis, make them identifiable, in particular as *trans* men. This idea has important repercussions and it is revisited throughout this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> Robert generally uses the terms ‘ftm’ (female to male) and ‘trans man’ interchangeably, while Munir and Charl indicated their sole preference for the term ‘trans man’. At the same time, all the participants pointed out their preference for the term ‘man’ in certain contexts – it is very important to them to pass as male in everyday society, so to some people they would only present themselves as men, and not necessarily as trans men. While they all situate themselves within the broader trans(gender) spectrum, their identities show a lot of similarity to the definition of ‘transsexual’ (that is, people who experience their gender being different to that assigned at birth, and who undergo some form of sex reassignment surgery to bring their body and gender identity into alignment), none of them prefer to use this term. However, as a lot of the texts that I consulted use the term ‘transsexual’, it inevitably found its way into this thesis and I ended up drawing on a certain vocabulary that I attempted to distance this study from. Whenever I specifically refer to the participants, I use the terms ‘trans men’ or ‘men’ interchangeably as these are the terms that they most frequently use when talking about themselves. I also use the terms ‘trans’ and ‘transness’ to refer to general positions and practices of questioning or disidentifying with the gender roles assigned to a person at birth. The weight and implication of these terms are of central concern in Chapter 2.2.3.2, where I specifically deal with debates surrounding trans terminology.

their photographic collections within an archival schema. Firstly, this entailed a process of selecting, interpreting and compiling photographs as the source material from which a life narrative can be read. Secondly, these personal archives facilitated the transference of information from their own possession to this thesis – this study thus involves a *procedure of making the private public in such a way that knowledge is preserved for posterity*. In this manner, the idea of ‘archive’ is constituted in the images and narratives that the participants share with an audience, and also in this thesis that, in effect, preserves those histories in a public way. Thirdly, this process of archiving also underlies a form of guardianship that is shared – at the outset of this project I explained to the participants this thesis entails a combined effort at interpreting modes of archiving and how it impacts on their lives as trans men and my own role as researcher and author. These ideas will become clearer as this thesis unfolds.

During a series of interviews that were conducted over a period of two years, Robert, Munir and Charl used narrative accounts to give a sense of their relationship to the medium of photography. During the first session of interviews in 2011, I met each of the research participants individually over a period of four months. These interviews were followed by a second series of meetings in 2012, as well as a session during which the participants gave their feedback on the dissertation. These transcribed interviews are attached separately as addenda, with Robert’s interviews and images collected under Addendum A, Munir’s collection under Addendum B, and Charl’s collection under Addendum C.

My project, as I explained it to these participants, is concerned with the manner in which they use photography as a vehicle for the recollection of their gender identities, and the manner in which they store, categorise and display (or archive) such photographs. Their responses to this explanation were diverse, both in terms of their relationship to the photographic medium, their own understanding of their roles as archivists, as well as their interpretation of their identities as trans men. During these conversations it emerged that varying degrees of visibility were afforded to the photographs that they chose to discuss – while some images were specifically pointed out for their ability to convey a sense of self that the participants found conducive to creating a personal, social or political identity, other examples were not shared by the participants out of fear that these images might put them at risk.

The shifting states of visibility that are manifested in the participants’ personal archives indelibly shaped the research methodology of this study. The very elusiveness that

sometimes marks these archives, as well as their character as particular, personal forms of recollection, necessitated an approach that does not pretend to be objectivist or empirical, neither does it offer material for generalisation, be it on an international or even a local level. The purpose of this study is not to locate a clear trajectory or narrative of South African trans lives. Even though my research endeavours to produce a more nuanced account of such lives by bringing previously unacknowledged narrations of self to the fore, this study is, firstly, particular to my own relationship with the research participants and, secondly, it is marked by certain silences, by wilful gaps and omissions that arose in the participants' interpretation of their own photographic archives. As my relationship with these participants developed, the methodological approach of this study changed into one that called for a degree of experimentation – while this thesis was initially envisaged as a platform for analysing personal photographic archives, it changed into a creative exercise of imagining, making and sharing archives.<sup>3</sup> This study thus underscores a specific way of looking at three trans lives as they exist in relationship to discourse and, significantly, to other lives.

The circle of delineation that I drew changed its shape several times during the course of this project, most noticeably in that it ended up being a collaborative effort at defining an archive. This study came to be constituted as a space of dialogue as the participants were given the opportunity to read and comment on my own interpretation of their archives (which are also incorporated into the thesis), thus destabilising my own role as 'autonomous' author/archivist of their lives.<sup>4</sup> By suggesting an understanding of their archives as constituted through a process of conversation, this study provides an interpersonal account of how ideas surrounding identity are manifested through photography and narrative. Despite the highly visual nature of these archives, and the intricate relationship between the photographic and textual that they underscore, the purpose of the study is not to present my own semiotic analysis or close reading of the participants' photographic selection, but

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<sup>3</sup> I do not present this model as the only way for understanding and writing on these men. As Elizabeth Grosz aptly puts it "[a] model is a heuristic device which facilitates a certain understanding, highlighting certain features while diminishing the significance of others; it is the selective rewriting of a situation whose complexity entails the possibility of other, alternative models, models which highlight different features, presenting different emphases" (1994: 209).

<sup>4</sup> Such an approach also responds to what Viviane Ki Namaste (2000) identifies as a critical lack of accountability to trans people by cisgender researchers. According to Namaste, trans people should not be reduced to objects of study (as they often have been in academic projects), but they need to be involved in the interpretations, findings and conclusions that are made of their lives by cisgender researchers. As Namaste rightfully argues, "transsexuals and transgendered people must be actively involved in the construction of academic knowledge about our bodies and our lives: anything less advocates a position where knowledge is produced, in the first and last instance, for the institution of the university" (2000: 267).



rather to focus on the narratives that are created and shared by the participants when they talk about their archives. As a narratological study that is centred on the visual, the focus is broadly on personal archives as sites of transactional knowledge, and specifically on photography as a vehicle for recollection in the lives of these trans men when thinking and talking about their bodies and identities.

Such an emphasis on narrative within writings on trans subjectivity resonates with the work of various other authors. Jay Prosser's (1998) account of the body narratives of transsexual subjects can be seen, for example, as an attempt to reinforce the authorial voice of these subjects. Writing from the perspective of a trans man, Prosser's work can be read as an endeavour for reclaiming and redefining the voice of transsexual subjects within academic writing. Similar to Prosser's work, Jason Cromwell's study of trans men is reflective of his own position as a trans subject, and it also highlights the value of narrative as a tool for giving trans subjects "control over their history and its interpretation" (1999: 14). As a cisgender<sup>5</sup> writer, Christopher Shelly (2008) uses what he identifies as a hermeneutic method for interpreting theoretical master-narratives (particularly from psychology and psychiatry) in line with the personal narratives of trans subjects. According to Shelly, such a method allows for "dialogic engagement with transpeople as 'knowing subjects'" (2008: 10), and it is useful for gauging the validity of certain theoretical frameworks by reading them alongside the narratives of specific trans people. However, his method does not allow for much dialogue between the trans subjects and his own interpretation of their lives, nor between the subjects and the theoretical framework that he employs – there are no signs in his text of the subjects actually reading his work and commenting on his interpretation of their narratives, and they do not really seem to enter into dialogue with Shelly's work. While Prosser and Cromwell claim a sense of embeddedness within trans scholarship insofar as they speak from experience, Shelly's attempt at using dialogue to bridge the gap between his own position as a cisgender scholar and the trans subjects that he studies falls short of being the open conversation he envisions it to be. It is also important to note that all these writers attempt to consolidate an account of transsexuality – of locating 'the' transsexual subject, be it from an inside or outside position. My own study is not concerned with such an understanding of trans subjectivity as its purpose is not to establish an essential, overarching definition (or narrative) of trans people, or trans men, but rather to focus on the particular narratives of the three research participants as instances that reflect how their ideas of self are

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<sup>5</sup> The term 'cisgender' is frequently used by the research participants to describe people whose gender identity matches their sex at birth, and I use it throughout this thesis. This term is generally preferred as it has fewer hierarchical implications than 'normal' or 'non-transgender' (Morgan *et al.* 2009: 5).

simultaneously personal and public, and embedded within discourses on the social, somatic and political.

Even though this thesis can be seen as a conversation of sorts, it is important to acknowledge that, as a cisgender person, I am writing from the position of an outsider. Within contemporary trans scholarship, this position has received much critical attention, especially with regards to the accountability of cisgender scholars who work with trans subjects. Patricia Elliot (2010), Namaste (2000), Shelly (2008) and Susan Stryker (2006), amongst others, call for such an outsider position to be approached with self-reflexivity and humility, and an awareness that one's own voice is not transparent or impartial. It is important to admit at the outset of this study that I am not a trans man and I cannot pretend to imagine the experience of inhabiting such an identity or body. During my meetings with the three participants, my own status as a homosexual man did provide for some connection, albeit only in the broadest sense that I share with the participants a bond within the lgbti spectrum. My own experience of masculinity also afforded some point of reference as I know that there are more and less convincing ways to display masculinity, and that, if persuasively enacted, a masculine identity can allow one to pass as 'normal' (in my case, as heterosexual). This is, nevertheless, the extent of my limited experience. For this reason, this study is slanted towards a stance that accepts Robert, Munir and Charl as participants (and not only subjects) in the creation of this thesis. By this I do not imply that my own voice as a cisgender academic can somehow be disregarded, or that it assumes a more neutral tone by the mere fact that a process of dialogue and repartee informed the research process that I employed. The purpose of this study is, however, not to provide a single, resolved voice on the lives of these trans men (one in which my own position can somehow be subsumed within those of the participants), but rather to show how different positions, and different forms of authorship and archiving, intersect and diverge. This project points towards places of connection and shared understanding, but also to places where slippages occur and where I am at a loss.

In much the same way, this study is also situated at the crossroads of theory and practice. I have necessarily utilised texts from a wide variety of fields, in particular work that falls within a poststructuralist framework, as well as texts from scholars situated within trans studies. This theoretical basis is called for seeing that much contemporary debate surrounding trans identities answers to, or intentionally departs from, a poststructuralist

framework.<sup>6</sup> Such divergence is predominantly centred on issues around agency and the treatment of the human body within poststructuralist texts, and it impacts on and is reflected in the discourses of self that are presented by the three participants. This basis is also supplemented with theories on photography, authorship and archiving in order to investigate the manifestation of trans accounts of self within visual and textual media.<sup>7</sup> This compound theoretical basis provides a means to read the specific narratives of the three research participants, while these narratives also offer material for refiguring (or sometimes even departing from) my own theoretical basis. In this regard, I find Namaste's formulation of "reflexive poststructuralist sociology" (2000: 40) of significant importance as it calls for a mode of investigation that deals with both the theoretical and practical aspects of (trans) life. Namaste presents this type of enquiry as a means to bring everyday trans experiences into focus within poststructuralist methodologies. Such a mode of enquiry into social relations can be regarded as reflexive rather than objectivist, and it calls for researchers/scholars to account for the role that their research plays in producing (and not merely describing) particular understandings of the social world of, inter alia, trans people.

The discursive basis of this study is largely based on sources that come from the European and American arenas as local writings on trans identities are limited.<sup>8</sup> There are, however, certain key discourses that impact on local trans lives, in particular with regards to the

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Anne Bolin (1994), Cromwell (1999), Amanda du Preez (2006), Elliot (2010), Leslie Feinberg (1996), Judith Halberstam (1998, 2005), Bernice Hausman (1995, 2001), Namaste (1996, 2000, 2005), Jean Bobby Noble (2006), Thomas Piontek (2006), Prosser (1998), Katrina Roen (2002) Henry Rubin (1998), Judith Shapiro (2005), Shelly (2008), Stryker (1998, 2006), David Valentine (2007), Stephen Whittle (2005), Stephen Whittle & Susan Stryker (2006), Jan Wickman (2001), Riki Ann Wilchins (1997), Gust Yep (2003).

<sup>7</sup> In this regard, my study is aligned with the work of various other authors who specifically deal with the visual and textual representation of trans men. Writers such as Prosser (1998) and Dean Kotula (2002) specifically focus on the combination of photography and text in the autobiographical accounts of self by trans men, while Jonathan Ames (2005), Holly Devor (1997), Morty Diamond (2004) and Matt Kailey (2005) use textual accounts to highlight the divergent lived experiences of such subjects.

<sup>8</sup> Of the few noteworthy sources, a recent compilation of autobiographical texts and images by trans men and women (Morgan *et al.* 2009) provides the most comprehensive account of South African trans identities. In addition, a small number of articles on trans identities by local writers have been published: Louise Vincent and Bianca Camminga (2009), for example, explore how South Africa's medical, legal and military establishments have exerted power over transsexual bodies; Tamar Klein (2009) explores transgender activism in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa; and Du Preez (2006) investigates the relation between technology and transsexuality. Du Preez's article is, however, devoid of any reference to the local context and is slanted towards a general critique of trans men and women as not being 'trans' (that is, queer or gender questioning) enough – an unfair assessment given the lack of fieldwork she has done amongst trans people. *Genderdynamix* also hosts a site where short writings are posted that relate to trans experiences in South Africa (*Genderdynamix, General Articles* 2012). Except for these sources, very little has been published or produced on the lives of local trans men and women.

position of trans subjects in medicine, psychoanalysis and legislation.<sup>9</sup> One of the major (and much lauded) local transformations in official discourses on sexuality and gender was initiated by the South Africa's post-apartheid Constitution, which was adopted on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1996. This Constitution is characterised by its radical break with former apartheid ideologies and laws – laws that had a severe impact on the visibility and expression of trans identities.<sup>10</sup> South Africa's post-apartheid Constitution explicitly outlaws gender and sexual discrimination, and the Constitutional Court has stated that such a law must also be interpreted as prohibiting discrimination on the basis of transsexuality (*Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* 1996). While this Constitution is often treated as an “enabling tool” (Van Zyl 2005: 235; see also Gevisser & Cameron 1994) for people whose sexual and gender identities were erased or subordinated by the apartheid state, its shortcomings have also been emphasised as its protection of certain marginalised (trans) identities is, in some cases, quite limited (Klein 2009; Morgan *et al.* 2009; van der Wal 2011). During my interviews with the research participants, the post-apartheid Constitution was repeatedly cited for both its success and failure in protecting their identities as trans subjects, and its discursive impact on the perceived security of their identities is a recurrent theme in their interpretation of their personal archives.

Medical discourses also frame the identities and lived experiences of the research participants insofar as these discourses play a large role in the process of gender transitioning, while they also intersect with legal and bureaucratic paradigms. For these trans men, a range of possible physical procedures mark their transition from one gender to another, with hormone replacement therapy playing a key part in this process. Hormone therapy can be followed by other medical interventions – such as a hysterectomy, ovariectomy, breast removal and the reconstruction of a male chest, and phalloplasty or metidioplasty – of which these trans men can choose which best suit their own

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<sup>9</sup> Even though I am not doing a clinical/medical, psychological or juridical study into trans identities, my research touches on issues that relate to these fields in an explicit or implicit way. This is because the research subjects made reference to these fields during our interviews, and also because much research on trans identities comes from or responds to these fields; in particular, much writing centres on the function of psychiatry and psychology as gate-keeping institutions in the lives of trans people who wish to gain access to medical intervention.

<sup>10</sup> As Klein (2009) demonstrates in her study of trans activism in South Africa, trans identities were generally rendered invisible within the apartheid state, yet they were definitely not non-existent. In fact, the Birth and Deaths Registration Act of 1963 allowed local trans persons to apply and have their sex status changed in the birth register after sex reassignment surgery (2009: 27). People who transitioned were, however, advised to leave the country or their hometown, break all ties with family and friends, and to live in stealth (Klein 2009; Kaplan 2004). At the same time, the South African military also carried out a large number of forced sex reassignment surgeries between 1971 and 1989 (at the height of the apartheid era) in order to ‘cure’ homosexual personnel (Kaplan 2004; Kirk 2000; Klein 2009). Ironically, more people transitioned in the 1980s than are actually doing so at present (Klein 2009); yet, it is important to note that trans men and women are more visible and better protected by state legislation than during the apartheid era (also see Vincent & Camminga 2009).

requirements.<sup>11</sup> It is, however, important to note that to these men a change of gender does not necessarily start with such medical procedures – while some of them changed their gender as they started with hormone therapy, others already lived as the *gender of their experience*<sup>12</sup> before any medical treatment was started. For the purpose of this thesis, I use the term ‘gender transition’ to refer to their experience of transitioning from one gender to another – an experience that may or may not correspond to forms of medical intervention, and that does not necessarily keep time with their physical (i.e. sexual) transition.

In order to be legally recognised as male, and to pass more easily as male within society, Robert, Charl and Munir have all applied for a name and gender change in their Identity Documents.<sup>13</sup> They have also undergone some form of surgery to transition into and/or pass as men and while some have, in their opinion, completed their physical transition, others are still busy with this process. Even though the participants sometimes discussed during our individual meetings the specific medical procedures that they have undergone or still wish to undergo, I do not disclose the detail of such procedures unless they explicitly referred or wanted to include information on their medical history. The purpose of this study has never been to gauge the extent to which these participants are ‘really men’ (that is, the degree to which their bodies resemble those of a person born as a biological man), or to demand of them some ‘evidence’ of their transition – if such forms of ‘evidence’ (be it in narrative or image) are supplied or included in this thesis, this is based on their own decision to do so.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In South Africa medical treatment can only be started once a trans subject has been “diagnosed” with Gender Incongruence – a condition that is acknowledged in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V). The recent change of the term from its previous formulation as ‘Gender Identity Disorder’ to ‘Gender Incongruence’ reflects a de-psychopathologisation of gender variance in this manual – something that many trans activists welcome as a move to eradicate the stigma of mental disease that was previously attached to gender variance (*No to Surgery* 2010; *Gender Identity Disorder now Gender Incongruence* 2010). However, some trans subjects also fear that, if the category of Gender Incongruence is removed from the manual completely, they would be left with little recourse when it comes to medical insurance and legal matters.

<sup>12</sup> I am much indebted to Robert for drawing my attention to the term ‘experience of gender’ – a term that he prefers to ‘choice of gender’, which is often used when describing trans conceptions of a gendered self. As Robert maintains, the idea of having a ‘choice’ in your gender identity is complex, and should not be reduced to an either/or scenario, thus his (and my own) preference for the word ‘experience’.

<sup>13</sup> South African law requires two medical reports to supplement this application that state that the subject has undergone some treatment, whether it is psychotherapy, hormonal or some form of surgery. The current law follows on an amendment of Act 49 of 2003, which means that genital surgery is no longer mandatory. Before this Act, trans men and women had to undergo genital surgery as proof of their commitment to their new gender.

<sup>14</sup> Some of the texts that I draw upon make a clear distinction between transitions in gender and sex – a distinction that is not always clear in the accounts of self that are presented by the research participants, especially as I never demanded of them to present a chronological account of when they started to *feel male*, and when they started to *become a man*. I would argue that, in the context of this study, such delineation is uncalled for as it insensitive to the nuances and complexities that pervade the participants’ experience of self.

The *Harry Benjamin Standards of Care* is another important discursive tool that frames local trans experiences. This is an international and constantly evolving document that provides information about transsexuality, and it is often drawn upon by medical professionals and trans men and women alike as a form of assistance. This document provides consensus about the psychiatric, psychological, medical and surgical management of gender incongruity, and it thus acts as a metanarrative of sorts that frames the lives of these trans men.<sup>15</sup> The research participants of this study frequently made reference to this document and its standards of care, and they either conceived of it as an enabling structure that protects them, or as a restricting document that constrains their view of self. Whatever their perceptions of this document might be, it remains one of the texts most often cited by the participants.

It is against the backdrop of these texts and discourses that my own study of the personal photographic archives of the three research participants takes place. Following on this introductory chapter, my investigation commences in Chapter 2 where I investigate the archive as a topo-nomological structure. By drawing on the work of, amongst others, Michel Foucault (1972) and Jacques Derrida (1995), this chapter serves as a platform for demonstrating the archive to be an ambivalent space that is fraught with contradiction. In addition, the topo-nomological properties of archive-making are investigated for their relevance to a post-colonial and post-apartheid South African context. The notion of archive as external prosthesis, as an outside substrate that can be used to recollect memory, is crucial when considering the relationship between memory and photographic practices within the context of this study. As such, Derrida's and Foucault's conceptions of the archive have important implications when dealing with the three research participants as mnemonic beings, both in terms of how subjectivity is conceived in relation to personal memories, as well as the tools that are used to recollect and share those memories.

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<sup>15</sup> The *Harry Benjamin Standards of Care* (HBSOC) was first published in 1979 and it is frequently revised and republished by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (while the name of this organisation has been changed to the World Professional Association of Transgender Health, I still use the old title as the participants specifically referred to the older organisation and its standards of care). This organisation aims at providing a document that "professionals may use ... to understand the parameters within which they may offer assistance to those with these [transsexual] conditions", while "persons with gender identity disorders, their families, and social institutions may use the SOC to understand the current thinking of professionals" (*Harry Benjamin Standards of Care* 2001). While Charl and Munir were largely positive about this document, Robert was more critical as he regarded it as a form of bureaucratic interference in his life and body. While this study is not really concerned with the HBSOC itself, it is important to acknowledge that these guidelines do impact on the archives and lives of the research participants in both overt and subtle ways.

From this discussion, I also draw on Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) formulation of gender to investigate the human as an archiving organism, as a being that occupies certain frames of reference for its own mnemonic recollection and subjective experiences. While Derrida and Foucault place much emphasis on the archive as a site of reiteration, as a place where memory is repeated and reproduced, Butler's concern is for frames of recognition that, through their reiteration, allow for humans to become intelligible as gendered beings. This section also draws on a Butlerian understanding of precarity (2004a, 2009a, 2009b) for investigating those normative conditions of personhood that play a role in the lives of the three research participants. The reiterative framing of these lives is marked with vulnerability, especially as these men are highly dependent on codes of gender for a sense of stability, and this chapter is concerned with how personal photographic archives might provide a space for these participants to counter a state of becoming unrecognisable or unintelligible. This perspective is also interrogated from a trans viewpoint, which is often critical of a Butlerian conception of gender identity, especially as her work is frequently read as opposed to or ambivalent about human agency. While my own study is greatly shaped by such debates, it is important to note that I am not trying to determine whether, or posit that, the three participants have agency or not (indeed, as this chapter reveals, their own understanding of agency is highly divergent and changing), but I am more concerned with how *ideas* and *interpretations* of agency are manifested in their archives.

In much the same way as the personal archive functions as a space where identity can be cited and recollected, photography provides a frame of reference that is simultaneously mnemonic and intricately tied to notions of self. The next section of this study, Chapter 3, is concerned with photography as an autobiographical tool of self-representation, and it addresses the medium's complex relation to textual and/or verbal modes of communication. This is particularly relevant given the role that both photographic and textual narratives play in the accounts of self of the research participants. Both images and words are used to represent ideas around a trans and/or male self, and such autobiographical narratives provide an intricate framework out of which the participants seem to emerge as authors of their own life stories. These narratives also have a profoundly social dimension insofar as they are complicit in debates around the public visibility of trans identities, particularly with regard to the way in which these identities have been framed within an autobiographical framework. While the previous chapter argues for an understanding of gender identity as a possible site of vulnerability, especially as it is lived and archived, this chapter demonstrates how photography fits within



archival structures, be it in terms of its value as 'evidence', or as a tool for bringing a (gendered) self into discourse.

This chapter starts by investigating photography as a mnemonic device and the value of faithful recollection that has long been invested in this medium. The supposed bridge that photography provides between memory and reality, between the subject and the external world, has dominated much writing on the photographic medium (see for example Barthes 1981; Butler 2009a; Sekula 1984, 1993; Sontag 2008), with the notion that only a tenuous, largely imaginary line binds memory, photography and reality together being common to such writing. These concerns with the evidentiary bearing of the photographic medium is important to take into account, especially as the research participants' ability to cite (or refute) a photograph as 'real' bears significantly on their lives. In addition, the combination of photography and narrative in the creation of their personal archives plays a profound role in establishing their voices as authors and archivists of their own life stories.

This view is supplemented by drawing on autobiography, firstly as a literary device for establishing and pledging responsibility to an author within a given text (Lejeune 1989; Haverty Rugg 1997), secondly as a tool for refiguring memory as a social practice of intersubjective recollection (Bamberg 2010; Gudmundsdóttir 2003; Papoulias 2003), thirdly as a space for reparation and creative imagining (Figlio 2003), and fourthly as a means for making trans lives visible and public (Prosser 1998; Cromwell 1999; Green 2006; Singer 2006). As autobiographic devices, photography and narrative play a central role in trans lives as they are often used as tools for creating awareness and visibility around trans-related issues. At the same time they also form part of a loaded history of scientific, medical and psychological studies in which trans subjects were often subjected to scrutiny for signs of 'abnormality', or forced to confess their own 'pathological' inclinations. This chapter investigates this tension by focusing on various examples of how trans identities have been framed through photography and narrative within autobiographic practices.

Chapter 4, which is the heart of this study, proceeds from the theoretical framework sketched out in the previous two chapters by dealing with the specific narratives and photographs that were used to construct the three personal archives of the research participants. The theme of visibility runs as a leitmotif through this chapter. During the interviews with the participants, certain images were chosen to constitute their personal archives, while other images were shown and discussed with the idea that they would not



be shared with the reader of this thesis. The images of the latter kind were sometimes narrated and thus transferred to text for the reader's benefit, whereas some images were completely censored, as neither image nor text is included in this study. This range of responses, from the most accentuated to the barely traceable, is reflected in the structure of this chapter as it moves from considering those photographs that were highlighted by the participants for the ability of these images to disclose their identities in a positive, empowering way, to those narrated and invisible images that were deliberately not shown or included because of their ability to render the participants' lives precarious.

This chapter is thus concerned with the manner in which the participants imagine and use their personal archives as a means to cite themselves as present or, in some cases, to render themselves absent. Through such an understanding of archiving, the process of making themselves visible or invisible emerges for these participants as a reiterative practice that occurs with and in relation to an other – be it in relation to me as researcher, to local trans communities, or even the larger social arena. As this chapter demonstrates, to tell the story of oneself to an other is never a final, completely stable act, and it doesn't lead to a complete resolution of the multiplicity and confliction that mark human subjectivity. Rather, the act of telling/showing is an act of underscoring, of choosing one version over another, and of drawing attention to both that which is brought to the surface, and that which remains untellable or invisible.

Chapter 4 also provides the space for the research participants to comment on and depart from my own analysis of their archives. After the main part of this thesis was written (that is Chapters 2 and 3, as well as Chapter 4 up to its conclusion), each participant was given a copy to read and review, with their responses being addressed in the closing section of this chapter.<sup>16</sup> This process of dialogue is also the basis of the conclusion of this thesis in Chapter 5, where I reflect on the viability of this research process in academic studies, and where I suggest possible directions for further enquiry. This concluding chapter also reviews the way in which theory and practice intersected in the creation of this thesis, as well as in the participants' personal archives. Finally, it asks the question of how relevant, or useful, this academic enquiry is for the three participants. As an archive, this thesis suggests a way of approaching, reading and finally departing from these men – by way

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<sup>16</sup> In these feedback sessions, Charl and Munir gave general feedback on the thesis, and I also asked them questions that related to their experience of the study (which were transcribed and form part of the addenda). In addition to responses to these questions, Robert also gave feedback on specific parts of the thesis as he wrote comments in the margins of his copy. While the participants' feedback is addressed in Chapter 4.4, Robert's written comments are attended to in footnotes throughout the thesis as they relate to specific ideas/sentences.

of sharing their lives, it speaks of intimacy and attachment between them and this archive, but also of distance, of finding them here and not-here, caught and distorted through my language and interpretation. To reflect on their response to this archive is thus to account for an intimate distance, for a space of shared knowledge that is both imagined and real.

## CHAPTER 2

### PERFORMING THE ARCHIVE

*We have archives – we preserve archives – because there is something in them that defies understanding but that we want to grasp. (Rapaport 1998: 68)*

The archive as mnemonic device and taxonomic structure plays a significant role in the visualisation of identity. My contention is that the archive provides discursive and visual material through which fluctuating narratives of self can be uncovered, traced, erased, renegotiated and fictionalised through intersubjective participation by both the creator and viewer of a particular archival construction. As a platform for the mnemonic recollection of subjectivity, particular attention is paid to certain key concepts around the archive's discursive constitution as a system of compiled, controlled and interpreted knowledge.

My investigation of the personal photographic archives of the three research participants is concerned with their formation as a space of intersection between (instead of an absolute delineation of) the various discourses that shape the reading and circulation of their holdings. By troubling the archive as a topo-nomological structure, I focus on the following features that are central to its constitution: first, I draw on the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida to demonstrate the archive to be an ambivalent space that is fraught with contradiction; from this discussion, I then draw on Judith Butler's formulation of gender to investigate the human as an archiving organism, a being that employs and occupies certain frames of reference for its own mnemonic recollection and subjective experiences; and lastly this perspective is interrogated from a trans viewpoint, which is often critical of a Butlerian conception of gender. My own theoretical stance, which incorporates some of these criticisms, will become clear in the process.

#### 2.1 THE ARCHIVE QUESTIONED: A TOPO-NOMOLOGICAL ENQUIRY

The archive as concept and institution provokes an array of responses, ranging from its bleak association with dust, dirt and death (Wilson 2002) – memory's entombment and embalmment – to more positive (and even positivist) writings that emphasise its essential role of providing the raw material for gaining access to and building upon the past (Breakell & Worsley 2007). The diversity that pervades the contemporary response to the archive requires a brief introduction before any investigation into its topo-nomological properties can commence. Archives have long been understood and sanctioned in the Western world for their role in "providing the stuff from which histories are constructed"

(Ferreira-Buckly 1999: 578). As record-keeping practices and institutions, state-sanctioned archives served (and to a considerable degree still serve) as the foundation for collecting and disseminating ‘evidence’ – they provide spaces for accumulating, trading and, decisively, for fabricating the ‘truth’. As a utopian space of “projected total knowledge” (Richards 1992: 104), the archive was central to the imagination of order and rationality during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>17</sup> The Western archive was envisioned as being more than just a building or a collection of documents, it was also “the nerve centre for all possible knowledge ... the collectively imagined junction of all that was known or knowable, a fantastic representation of an epistemological master pattern, a virtual focal point for the heterogeneous local knowledges of metropole and empire” (Richards 1992: 104).

Particularly relevant to a post-colonial and post-apartheid South African context is the implementation of the archive for its discursive support of imperialism (Dirks 2002; Richards 1992, 1993; Steedman 2002; Stoler 2002, 2009), its mnemonic inscription of colonial discourses and Western hegemony (Arondekar 2005; Ballantyne 2001; Burton 2003; Chakrabarty 2002; McEwan 2003), and its apartheid legacy of regulation, exclusion and erasure (Hamilton *et al.* 2002; Harris 2002). South African archival discourses are indelibly marked by the positivist assumptions of the apartheid era as state-sanctioned archives were fashioned into tools of the apartheid system (Harris 2002: 137, 139). These archives fostered what Verne Harris aptly identifies as a “laager mentality” (2002: 139) as the social and political memories that they recollected were fundamentally skewed, and were based on the radical exclusion of any counter discourses to the master narrative of white supremacy. As such, Richard’s definition of the archive as a utopian space is reflected in South Africa’s own state-sanctioned archives that simultaneously drew on nineteenth-century positivist paradigms that presented the archive as a reflection of ‘reality’, as well as apartheid discourses that imagined, propagated, institutionalised the sanctity and superiority of white identities. The apartheid archive can therefore best be described as a utopian space, as it aspired to transform myths of racial supremacy into social and political realities by using Western ‘archival sciences’ as a mode of recollection.

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<sup>17</sup> According to Thomas Richards (1992), this timeframe is particularly relevant to the Victorian context as the rapid expansion of the British Empire led to various state facilities being charged with the task of imposing order on the amorphous mass of records that was being accumulated. This model was also prevalent in other European countries where the Western mythology of total knowledge was central to the exertion of power by the state (1992: 104). I argue that, as South Africa was under British supervision at the time that such archival models took shape, it was most likely influenced by archival discourses that presented the epistemological master pattern of British and/or Western supremacy.

Power suffuses archival discourses as various regulatory and hegemonic functions underpin their systems of collection, classification, interpretation and public dissemination. The Western archive as instrument for collecting and applying knowledge, as the “sacrosanct domain of the discipline of history” (Arondekar 2005: 10), is intertwined with an authoritarian role of providing traces “of the past collected either intentionally or haphazardly as ‘evidence’” (Burton 2003: 3). The archive is a site of governance through which laws are entrenched (Gonzales Echevarria 1990: 31) and through which the state can seize control of information production (Burke 2000: 138-141; Withers 2002). It is a political centre of power (Osborne 1999) through which bodies of knowledge are not only established, but a public is also created for that knowledge (Golinski 1998: 84; Lynch 1999: 75-79; Myerson 1998).

Critical inquiries into the archive as institutional anamnesis characterises contemporary writing, as the various discourses that inform its genesis and genealogy are increasingly viewed with suspicion. Scholars from a wide range of fields have started to destabilise those archival structures that upheld colonialist, positivist and/or modernist preoccupations with taxonomies of ‘authenticity’ and ‘universality’.<sup>18</sup> The destabilisation of the notion of ‘archival objectivity’ is central to contemporary interrogations of those hegemonic institutions, such as colonial powers, for example, that imposed intellectual order with the intention of gaining control over their subjects (Schwartz 2000: 36; see also Solomon-Godeau 1991, Pinney *et al.* 1995). Such enquiries into the archive are particularly relevant to the South African context where text and photography were used to project and impose colonial modernity (Hayes *et al.* 2002: 106), and to provide a map of apartheid’s vast bureaucracy (Harris 2002). A post-colonial/post-apartheid challenge to the positivist aspirations of the archive is predominantly concerned with challenging the accuracy of its (photographic/textual) modes of recollection, as well as the status of authoritative knowledge that this institution has long maintained (Hayes *et al.* 2002: 114; see also Banta & Hinsley 1986; Landau 1996; Mofokeng 1996).

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<sup>18</sup> The archive has often been used as a vehicle to claim ‘transcendental’ knowledge, yet its partiality has specifically been highlighted by a range of academic writers who are very critical of the essentialist claims and acts of censorship that pervade archival institutions. The erasure and vilification of certain identities is of particular interest in contemporary (re)configurations of the archive. For example, writers such as Giorgio Agamben (1999; 2000) and Amy Villarejo (2002) are particularly interested in diasporic holdings that are often absent from institutional archives because of the mobility of their subjects, while Anjali Arondekar (2005), Bill Lukenbill (2002), Ann Cvetkovich (2002), Marc Epprecht (2004) and Graeme Reid (2005) touch on the absence of lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgendered subjects within the state-sanctioned and/or colonial archive. State control and censorship exerted by/in the service of the imperial archive over its Western and colonial subjects have also been a well-researched field of investigation (see for example Burke 2000; Duncan 1999; Joyce 1999; Steedman 1998, 2002; Stoler 2009; Withers 2002).

The refiguring of archives within the South African context is an important process, given the socio-political discourses that have shaped and delineated these institutions' capacity for 'truthful' recollection. In a broader sense, such a process of archival reconfiguration is important as it allows for a rethinking of the role of memory in contemporary South Africa. Apartheid and colonial discourses have left an indelible mark on local processes of mnemonic recollection and, as Kenneth Christie argues, "South Africa is a country where the notion of 'fractured' memory is given new meaning. Memory is not fractured here; rather it is splintered, rent apart, torn into a multitude of pieces" (2000: 8). The theme of picking up shards of memory frequently surfaces in writings that deal with South Africa's fragmented mnemonic relation to its colonial and apartheid past – be it in suggestions to use memory as a means of countering silence and amnesia (Brink 1998) and as a tool for opposing apartheid's grand narratives (Lewis 2000); to disclose personal memories to the public in order to be held accountable for them (Cassin 2001); or trying to find shared memories amidst divergent and conflicting histories (Nuttall & Coetzee 1998). These ideas show a concern with memory as a vehicle for collectively and publically rethinking South African identities within a democratic framework.

One such platform for rethinking memory is provided by the establishment of 'other', unofficial archives that feed off the visual and discursive material neglected or censored by normative institutions.<sup>19</sup> This phenomenon is particularly relevant to the South African context where marginalised identities (be they sexual, racial, cultural, etc.) are conspicuous in their radical absence or distortion. With certain identities being deprived of visual and discursive space for expression, local archiving practices show a growing need for finding documents/images to verify historic existence. At the same time, the very structure of the archive is drawn into disrepute by questioning its mnemonic capability to accurately render,

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<sup>19</sup> There has been a growing body of archival institutions specifically concerned with previously ignored or repressed histories – a phenomenon that is evident in the establishment of various 'alternative' archives in South Africa. The *Gay and Lesbian Archives*, for example, is concerned with the heritage and neglected past of local homosexuals as it strives to be "a permanent institutional home for the wide range of historical and archival material relating to gay and lesbian experience in South Africa" (*Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa* [n.d.]), while it also houses a range of material on trans identities. Another example of such a visual renegotiation of the photographic archive is seen in Jean Brundrit's *Lesbian Story* project, which entails a photographic workshop and exhibition presented in Cape Town (Brundrit 2008). For this exhibition Brundrit presented fictional photographic images of lesbian lives across the colour divide as a visual challenge to the erasure of lesbians from the official archives of South Africa. Another artist who is concerned with the creation of alternative photographic archives is Zanele Muholi, whose work can be read as a visual archive of lesbian experience (Thomas 2010: 423). By producing images that map a range of experiences, be they lesbian and/or black, Muholi produces a visual history that simultaneously runs parallel with and counter to South African archival structures. However, it is important to note that such projects do not necessarily constitute an 'alternative' to the positivist discourses that mark archival sciences – these photographic archives may supplement and even offer counter-knowledges to official archives, yet they do not entirely escape the rhetoric of offering visual 'proof' of these knowledges. This is an issue that I unpack later in this thesis when I address the repercussions of this discourse of 'offering proof' within my own research project.

categorise and recall various forms of knowledge. For this reason, an attempt to refigure the archive necessitates a critical turn from “claims of the archive to constitute the record, to provide evidence and to act as source” (Hamilton et al. 2002: 9). In post-apartheid South Africa this implies a critical renegotiation of the positivist archival paradigm that is still utilised for locating and presenting records to verify a certain political or social reality (Harris 2002: 149).

Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* (1995) presents such a reconfiguration of the archive as an authorising institution by troubling its reliability and autonomy as memory device. Although not the first writer to do so,<sup>20</sup> Derrida’s investigation of the archive as axiomatic structure reflects burgeoning academic and public interest in issues surrounding the guardianship and institutional authorisation of archival matter. Derrida’s interest in the archive derives from its institutional power to inscribe and authorise its own existence – a right that “imposes and supposes a bundle of limits which have a history” (1995: 4). The archontic power of unification, identification and classification is enacted through the “gathering together of signs” (1995: 3); thus producing the archive as a single corpus that is at once institutive and conservative (1997: 7).

Derrida’s definition of the archive extends certain ideas that were formulated by Michel Foucault in his engagement with the archive in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972). The nomological power of the archive, that is the discourses that entrench its institutional laws, are emphasised by Foucault for their ability to exclude and censor. Foucault investigates the archontic power of social institutions as they function in systems of knowledge that govern the appearance and regulation of discourses. By emphasising its nomological function, Foucault maintains that the archive is more than a collection of cultural texts and statements as:

The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Michel Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language* (1972); Natalie Zemon Davis’s *Fiction in the Archives* (1987), Thomas Richard’s *Imperial Archive* (1993) and Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria’s *Myth and Archive* (1990). This renewed interest in the archive in post-colonial and poststructuralist scholarship can be regarded as an ‘archival turn’ (see Geary 1994; Stoler 2002), which shows an important shift from the notion of the archive-as-source to the archive-as-subject.

multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities. (1972: 129)

The archive is not a system that merely preserves and resurrects, according to Foucault, and it is not the “library of libraries”, but it rather “reveals the rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification. It is *the general system of the formation and transformation of statements*” (1972: 130, emphasis in original). According to Foucault, the archive functions at a particular level between the system of construction and the actual collection (between the *language* and the *corpus*), and to speak about the archive, particularly one’s own archive, would imply an impossible position of trying to step outside its system of enunciability, to assume a location outside the very rules that constitute both the archive’s and our own modes of being. The archive’s intermediate location from which it traces the discursive sedimentation of knowledge presents a threshold of some sort. The archive is constituted as a bordered space of possibility that is founded on difference – its delineations draw attention to that which is separated from it, that which “we can no longer say, and that which falls outside our discursive practice” (1972: 130-131). The archive as Foucault conceives of it is therefore a law-entrenched space where knowledge only materialises in fragments and levels, and where it is tightly bound to its own limitations, gaps and omissions. To ‘realise’ an archive in its totality – and I draw on this notion both in the sense of ‘trying to understand’ and ‘to make real’ – is also impossible, as no archive can be described exhaustively or reach a point of finalisation.

Derrida expands on the notion of the archive as discursive authority by noting that the concept and structure of archive is exercised at the intersection of both its nomological and topological properties – it functions as a place of *commandment* and *commencement*, a locality from which order and authority can be initiated. By tracing interrelated systems of power and history that operate within the Western archive as topo-nomological space, he underscores ambivalence as the archival root of both bodies of information and disciplines of knowledge. For example, the archive’s institutional function of providing a privileged topology, a space for the private to become public, does not necessarily mean that it signifies a progression from the secret to the non-secret. In fact, Derrida insists that the topo-nomological properties of the archive “without which no archive would ever come into play or appear as such” (1995: 3), transform it into a scene of domiciliation that is at once visible and invisible. The paradox that lies at the heart of the archive – the prerequisite “to shelter itself and, sheltered, to conceal itself” (ibid.) – reveals its foundation to be configured as a complicated grid of power. For all the security and order that it may



seem to provide, it remains an obscure institution that is never completely penetrable or comprehensible. The archive cannot be known in its entirety for it always eludes our grasp – it provides but a fragment of history, and even those historical remnants that are archived (at the cost of those that are not) can never be anything more than substitutes for memory. The archive is not a place where ‘History’ can be ‘Known’ – where an autonomous, all-encompassing body of evidence can be comprehended in its totality – but rather a place that is defined by absences, mediated knowledges and partial understanding.

Convolution permeates the archive as Derrida conceives of it, because its ability to provide shelter and stability to historical documents – its compulsion to erect a memorial for memories – is flawed for various reasons. In terms of guardianship, the archive’s drive to *shelter* impels it to shelter itself from the memories that it is supposed to keep safe – that is, the archive forgets itself (or rather its ‘self’) by transferring these memories into physical and/or discursive vestiges that stand in the place of the original memories and historical events. It loses its mnemonic hold over the specific histories that it tries to preserve, and that it draws on for tropological definition – namely, its character<sup>21</sup> as a distinct trope of memory made preservable. Derrida argues in this regard that the archive actually works against memory as it:

produces memory, but produces forgetting at the same time. And when we write, when we archive, when we trace, when we leave a trace behind us ... the trace is at the same time the memory, the archive, and the erasure, the repression, the forgetting of what it is supposed to keep safe ... It’s a work of mourning. (1995: 54)

In addition, the fact that guardianship and localisation are necessary for creating an archive implies that certain *archons*, or archival custodians, are in charge of the mnemonic collection. These guardians are accorded the hermeneutic right to compile and interpret the archives – they are entrusted with the jurisdiction of “speaking the law” (Derrida 1995: 2), that is, of interpreting facts. Thus, the archive cannot simply be “a mass of facts, of *true*

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<sup>21</sup> I specifically use this term to suggest that a human quality, a mnemonic temperament, is often invested in the archive – it is simultaneously seen as a human product but also an extension of the human. As its main concern is with memory, with the personal made public, I argue that human characteristics are often transposed to the archive in order to invest the machine and institution that holds the delicate and special memories of its subjects with a sense of humanity. The archive is therefore treated as something that can remember, but that can also forget; it can provide a sense of order and security, but it can also destroy and consume its holdings.

*facts*, to be gathered and delivered and made available” (Derrida 1998: 50, my emphasis) as a degree of subjective construal is always at play in archival practices.

Consequently, the archive is not simply a mechanism for exhibiting knowledge, but also for establishing it (Derrida 1995: 55), as it is shaped by the inscriptions and interpretations of its archivists. According to Derrida, the signature of the archivist is always read in conjunction with the knowledge one tries to access in an archive, and it can take the form of the apparatus, the institution and the language that are used to produce an archive. “The archivist doesn’t simply perceive the documents, doesn’t simply receive the documents. It organises it, it produces it in a certain way, and in this production implies the language on the part of the archivist” (Derrida 1998: 64). As a result, the archivist’s signature is linked to the nomological function of the archive – it references the law and inscribes the institutional structure of a specific archive, thus establishing the hegemony of a certain archival language and reiterative convention of classifying and naming.<sup>22</sup>

This assertion highlights the process of mediation that occurs in the archive, and it troubles any positivist aspirations that might be held towards the archive as a passive receptacle from which knowledge can be recalled in a seemingly objective manner. The process of archiving “produces as much as it records an event” as the “technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its coming into existence” (Derrida 1995: 17, emphasis in original).<sup>23</sup> This means that the archive is not merely a mechanism for storing memories or documents of the past, but that the archive is also inclined towards the future as it is constantly and repetitively (re)shaped by processes of selection and interpretation (Derrida 1998: 40, 42).

Being directed towards the “future anterior” (1998: 46), the future-to-come, the archive is open to reinterpretation, and can never be closed or finalised. It is dependent on and

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<sup>22</sup> The signature of the archivist, that is the structure of the archive that reflects the biases and desires of the *archon*, provides temporary cohesion to the diversity of histories that often rule collections. This is an issue that is unpacked in more depth in Chapter 4, where I investigate personal photographic archives and the discursive and formal signatures that are used to grant authority to their creators and emphasise the legitimacy of their holdings.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida argues that “the mutation in technology changes not simply the archiving process, but what is archivable – that is, the content of what has to be archived is changed by technology” (1998: 46). These changes are anticipated by Derrida’s call for future reconceptualisations of the archive as it may depart from (or renegotiate) its more traditional topo-nomological foundations, especially in terms of archival guardianship (also see Derrida 1995: 16). This is a very important point, especially when one considers the implications of certain technological procedures, such as photography, on the format and content of an archive. I elaborate on this notion of archival production in Chapter 3, where I investigate the role of photography as a form of self-authorship and a means to reproduce knowledge.

always awaiting the future – the “what is coming” and the “what will have come” (1998: 46). For that reason Derrida considers the archive as it is experienced *at the present* to be a complex amalgam of the past and the future, seeing that what we read as *the past* was instituted by an archival technique that anticipated *the future*. From this feature Derrida deduces that “what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way” (1995: 18). The traditional notion of the Western archive as a means to retroactively experience untainted or unbiased knowledge is complicated by the idea that those systems of knowledge were compiled, interpreted and deemed archivable with the future in mind. That which *cannot yet* be archived, the future-to-come, is therefore proactively anticipated – and largely imagined – in order to give shape and meaning to the holdings of an archive. The notion of the archive as a vault for historical ‘facts’ and ‘truths’ reaches a critical point as its very foundation as institutionalised shelter and order is threatened.<sup>24</sup>

The status of the archive as a mnemonic monument, and the authority that its institution and concept still exerts in Western culture, are destabilised by Derrida, who rather emphasises the archive’s volatile nature and conflicting interests. One of the most profound contradictions that lie at the heart of the archive is its hypomnesic disposition – that is, the tendency towards memory loss from which every archive suffers. Fundamental to Derrida’s concept of the archive is its ability to represent memory – the internal archive – on an outside, meaning that “*there is no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside*” (Derrida 1995: 11, emphasis in original).

By surfacing on an outside, the archive can be regarded as prosthesis for an inside – it is the external substrate of memory. Modes of archiving produce layers or prosthetic apparatuses for inscribing memory exterior to the body proper (1995: 26).<sup>25</sup> The necessity for the archive to be consigned to an external place is based on its requirement for memorisation, repetition and reproduction, with its compulsion towards repetition highlighted by Derrida as a sign of its proclivity towards the Freudian death drive.<sup>26</sup> The

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<sup>24</sup> Also see Arjun Appadurai (2003) and Laura Ann Stoler (2009) on archival production as site of aspiration and imagining.

<sup>25</sup> Derrida is specifically concerned with the act of writing as a form of impression, as a scriptural mark that is left on archival substrates (1995: 26). For the purpose of this thesis, I extend this definition to photography as a methodology for inscribing meaning onto a technical substrate. This is unpacked in more depth in Chapter 3, where I investigate the role of photography in the archiving of memory and subjectivity.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida draws on a Freudian definition of the death drive as a traumatic force that propels its subject towards destruction and non-existence. Derrida is interested in the death drive as a force of aggression that

death drive is cited as an archiviolithic force – a feverish fire that burns in the heart of the archive and that threatens every document in its holdings with complete obliteration. The archive's need for an external substrate, for an *outside* where memories can be inscribed and recollected, makes it impossible for the archive to be a form of internal anamnesis: "on the contrary, the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory" (Derrida 1995: 11). The hypomnesic archive is therefore created at the exact instance when amnesia threatens its existence:

Right on what permits and conditions archiving, we will never find anything other than that which exposes destruction, and in truth menaces with destruction, introducing, *a priori*, forgetfulness and the archiviolithic into the heart of the monument. Into the "by heart" itself. The archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself. (1995: 12)

The archiviolithic force undermines the actual existence of the archive; however, it can also be reinvested in another logic that actually reinscribes the archive as "the idol of its truth" (1995: 12) – it can be disguised to serve the economic drive of the archive, that is, its need to keep and protect and accumulate. The threat of infinite destruction and of irreversible forgetfulness that seemingly contradicts the archive's need to conserve also instigates the very desire *to archive*. It is this contradiction, this radical destruction of memory that threatens (and prompts) the need to preserve, that Derrida describes as archive fever. As mnemonic structure, the archive is a troubled and unstable institution at best, and its feverish ambivalence undermines the stability that its authoritarian facade presumes.

Two of the most salient characteristics of the archive that are identified by Derrida are, firstly, its reiterative compulsion towards (re)collection, that is, its structural and nomological inclination towards selecting, producing and interpreting the residue of the past. This process of recollection is not transparent or impartial and, as Derrida reveals, the archive is characterised by several contradictions that burn feverishly at the heart of its topological constitution. Being at once a site of order and uncertainty, the notion of the archive as an ambivalent site of knowledge is a thread that runs through this thesis, and that is repeatedly picked up in discussions on personal photographic archives. Secondly,

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not only incites forgetfulness, but that "commands the radical effacement ... [of the] archive" (1995: 13). The death drive bestows on the archive its qualities of finitude and expropriation, yet it also poses the threat of radical, infinite destruction, without which there cannot be the desire to archive (1995: 94). The incorporation of the Freudian death drive as traumatic force by Derrida in his formulation of archive fever (or *mal d'archive*) is interpreted by Herman Rapaport as the "repetition of the trauma that is repeated in such a way that the trauma can be mastered ... but in addition, *mal d'archive* concerns a forgetting or obliteration of the trauma that the trauma itself instantiates in its being repeated as discourse" (1998: 76).

the notion of the archive as external prosthesis, as an outside substrate that can be used to recollect memory, is crucial when investigating the relationship between memory and photographic practices, as well as the nomological discourses that play an indelible role in externalising memory. Derrida's conception of the archive therefore has important implications for the human as mnemonic being, both in terms of how subjectivity is conceived in relation to personal memories, as well as the tools that are used to recollect and repeat those memories.

## **2.2 BUTLER AND THE REITERATION OF SUBJECTIVITY**

When studying the human in relation to the archive, or even the human as an archiving machine, questions regarding subjectivity arise, above all about processes of identity formation that are composed around existing power structures. This subsection is concerned with processes of reiteration by which both archives of knowledge and subjects as archives are produced. Derrida emphasises the archive as a topo-nomological structure that is driven by a reiterative compulsion, and I extend this formulation of the archive by drawing on Judith Butler's notion of performativity as a reiterative process through which subjectivity is constituted. Butler's formulation of precarious subjectivity is also of great importance, particularly as it relates to trans identities, while the diverse (and often critical) reactions to her treatment of the human subject as a nomologically wrought and linguistically constituted entity is also unpacked.

Contemporary investigations of the archive show a growing trend of expanding its function and conception so as to incorporate a performative dimension. Terry Cook and Joan Schwartz (2002), for example, draw attention to the similarities between a Butlerian conception of gender and the constitution of archives – both of which are, in their opinion, manifested through a sustained and ritualised implementation of social discourse. Diana Taylor (2003), Tom Nesmith (2002) and Eric Ketelaar (2001) share a perspective on archives as reiterative spaces and performative repertoires where discourses are brought into being, repeated and stylised through acts of memory-making. Anne Cvetkovich (2003) also draws a link between an experience of trauma and archives of feelings – for Cvetkovich, archives are not just sites where knowledge is preserved, but feelings (of vulnerability, for example) also forms part of the emotional memories that archives carry. All these perspectives have in common a reorientation of the archive so as to acknowledge its performative dimension, as well as its relation to experiences of vulnerability. It is against the backdrop of such perspectives that this section presents a Butlerian formulation

of performative and precarious gender identities, and suggests ways of understanding how such identities resonate within archival practices of recollection.

### 2.2.1 Performativity, Gender and the Human Subject

Butler's investigation of identity politics in her books *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993) had tremendous bearing on a wide range of academic fields, while they left an indelible mark on the disciplines of gender studies, feminist theory and queer theory. Butler's genealogical account of subjectivity as a linguistic process through which identity is assumed, is aligned (inter alia) with the work of certain poststructuralist authors, most noticeably with Foucault for his theorisation of the human subject and its discursive constitution (1979, 1980b),<sup>27</sup> and with Derrida for his deconstruction of the subject as an ontological entity (1972).<sup>28</sup> The genealogical basis of Butler's enquiry into identity as an effect, as a moment of emergence rather than the source of history and discourse, clearly follows a poststructuralist account of subjectivity as linguistically constituted. Such an account, which engages critically with issues regarding (gender) identity and troubles the notion of the human as agent (or, for the purpose of this thesis, the human as autonomous archivist) is very important, particularly as it provides a theoretical basis for enquiring into the reiterative function of identity as it is discursively and visually manifested.<sup>29</sup> This section will engage with these ideas by drawing on certain concepts that are central to Butler's analysis of identity – namely performativity and precarity – and by referring to the implications they might have for conceptualising human agency.

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<sup>27</sup> Butler draws on Foucault's notion of discourse as a group of statements that constitutes subjectivity in different historical contexts. Discourses around sexuality 'produced' the homosexual subject, for example, by simultaneously calling this subject into being and establishing control over its subjecthood (Foucault 1980b). In terms of her perspective on gender, Butler draws on Foucault's formulation of power as a diffused and generative system of hegemony, as a "complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power" (1980a: 101).

<sup>28</sup> Derrida's concept of *différance*, the linguistic dependence of meaning upon that which is absent or excluded from a sign's own definition, is important to Butler insofar as it has significant implications for her notion that subjects are constituted through language. According to Butler, "Derrida concludes that the limits of signification, i.e. the 'difference' of the sign from what it signifies, emerges time and again wherever language purports to cross the ontological rift between itself and pure referent" (1987: 178). This leads Butler to the hypothesis that, if signs are always caught in a rift that precludes any form of finality, the human subject as constituted through language will also be affected by this lack of finality and completion, thus rendering it unstable and open-ended (1987: 178-179).

<sup>29</sup> Butler's insistence on language as fundamental to the performative value of identity has been criticised by various writers for what they perceive to be her lack of attention to the materiality and political value of lived experiences, and her supposed denial of agency – this is an important issue that I address later in this chapter when I discuss the implications for and reception of performativity when it is applied to trans identities.

Butler's investigation into the discursive function of 'the subject' as a gendered category entails a genealogical query about "the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses, with multiple and diffused points of origin" (1990: viii-ix, emphasis in original). Butler problematises the notion of a human subject who has complete agency (which she refers to as the "humanist subject") by distinguishing between performance and performativity – the former being a voluntary, singular act of agency, while the latter denotes subjectivity as an ongoing, repetitive process. Butler argues that human subjectivity should not merely be understood as something that 'is', neither should identity be seen as a voluntarily constructed or performed impression of 'self', but the performative nature of identity renders it a compulsory, reiterative and ritualised process, a "citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (1993: 2).<sup>30</sup>

Butler makes this distinction between performance and performativity "insofar as the latter [performativity] consists of a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's 'will' or 'choice'" (1993: 234). Performativity can thus be perceived as the power of discourse and social norms to produce identity through processes of reiteration:

[W]here there is an 'I' who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that 'I' and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will. Thus there is no 'I' who stands *behind* discourse and executes its volition or will *through* discourse. On the contrary, the 'I' only comes into being through being called, named, interpellated ... and this discursive constitution takes place prior to the 'I'. (Butler 1993: 225)

Butler therefore regards identity, and particularly the binary conception of gender, as *produced through grids of power* – through a matrix (1990) or a system of hegemony

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<sup>30</sup> Butler's theory of 'performativity' is simultaneously indebted to J.L. Austin's speech act theory (1962), particularly his formulation of illocutionary utterances, as well as Derrida's deconstruction of Austin's text (1972). As Butler maintains, her use of Austin is not a "loyal" one (1999: 164), and this is evident in her departure from Austin's text in certain significant ways. Firstly, Butler differs from the Austinian notion that "the subject who speaks precedes the speech in question" (1997a: 24), and she draws on Louis Althusser's (1971) notion of interpellation – of the speech act that precedes the subject and that brings him/her into linguistic existence – as discursive counterpoint to Austin's notion of a performing subject. Secondly, Butler also makes use of Derrida's notion of the instability of the sign to depart from Austin's insistence that performative utterances are in need of appropriate circumstances – Butler rather aligns herself with Derrida by insisting that a performative utterance is never completely controllable or comprehensible, but it is "excitable" as it may "[exceed] the moment it occasions" (1997a: 14). Interpellation and performative utterances are highlighted by Butler as excitable (as somehow exceeding the subject), which implies that the subject is not in complete control of the discourses that he/she uses (1997a: 35).

(1993). Gender as performative structure, as “a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame” (Butler 1990: 33), denotes a process of ‘doing’, and not necessarily a ‘doer’ that stands behind this process. The ontological status of the gendered body is therefore entrenched in the various discourses, the sequence of acts and processes of repetition, that constitute its being. To displace gender, that is, to evade the discourses through which it is cited, is not really a viable option, according to Butler, as it is impossible to ‘step outside’ the discourses that constitute our being. As Butler argues: “[t]here is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tools lying there” (1990: 145).<sup>31</sup>

The discursive production of a gendered self is also extended by Butler to the body – performativity, as a discourse that has the power to produce what it names, plays an important role in corporeal organisation (Salih 2002: 84). As Butler argues in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), both sexual and gendered differences are constituted through performative modes of cultural articulation. A subject is interpellated through the discursive imposition of gender and sexual difference – ‘he’ and ‘she’ therefore come into being through the reiteration of certain norms that are, according to Butler, not ‘natural’, but situated around a heterosexual matrix that determines the modes and possibilities of iterability. Butler is not trying to omit the materiality of the body by overemphasising its cultural production, a point that she raises in various interviews after *Bodies that Matter* appeared,<sup>32</sup> but she rather argues that the body as physical entity “never makes itself known or legible outside of the cultural articulation in which it appears. This does not mean that culture produces the materiality of the body. It only means that the body is always given to us, and to others, in some way” (Butler 2005a: 14, emphasis in original). Discourses around sex and gender serve as forms of cultural affirmation that, according to Butler, contribute to (rather than

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<sup>31</sup> Attempting to subvert gender, to step outside its regulated process of repetition, are questioned by Butler insofar as notions such as ‘subversion’ and ‘agency’ are conditioned by the very discourses that these terms aim to displace (1990: 145-147). At the same time, Butler maintains that “[t]he task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat, or, indeed to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself (author’s emphasis, 1990: 148). Butler is ambivalent about the possibility of subverting the heterosexual, binarist matrix of gender, and a contradiction seems to underlie her description of subjectivity. This point is further elaborated on in her later work – see, for example, Butler (1997b) – and it is revisited later in this chapter.

<sup>32</sup> Butler has been criticised, particularly for *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993), for denying or ignoring what some perceive to be the concrete existence of the body (see for example Hull 1997 and Moi 1999) and its lived experiences as a material organism (Prosser 1998). Nonetheless, Butler insists in several interviews (see for example 1994 & 2005a) that she does not deny the materiality of the body, but that she rather argues that the cultural affirmation of the body inevitably contributes to its understanding. Butler’s concern is therefore not with eluding the material body at the cost of its discursive constitution (Butler 1997c; Colebrook 2008; Mitchell 2008), but rather to explore that complex relationship between the body and subjectivity as one that is negotiated by certain norms or frames of thought. I address this issue in more depth later in this chapter, when I specifically investigate various responses from trans writers to Butler’s notion of performativity.



constitute) the matter that they name. The important issue that Butler raises is that bodies are never described in a 'neutral' manner, but there are always certain norms that are central to the sexing of the body. Butler acknowledges that biological differences exist, but it is also crucial to ask "under what discursive and institutional conditions do certain biological differences ... become the salient characteristic of sex" (1994: 33-34).

The discursive framing, the manner in which the body is "animated" and "contoured" by norms (Butler 1994: 32), is of importance when considering the social existence of the human subject. As Butler insists: "language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather, it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible" (1997a: 5). A human subject therefore conceives of its own existence by means of a language that precedes and exceeds the subject – an idea that Butler brings into play by referring to Foucault's argument that "discourse is not life; its time is not ours" (cited in Butler 1997a: 28). For Butler, this statement has two important implications – firstly, that human life is not reducible to the sphere of discourse; that life (and matter) exceeds the linguistic structures that frame subjectivity. In this case, Butler opposes the easy collapse of discourse and enunciation, the complete reduction of the life of the subject to discourse, in order to counter a "logocentric idea to the effect that the subject comes into being through speech and is only speech" (1999: 165, emphasis in original). Secondly, human life may exceed linguistic frameworks, but these frameworks also exceed human life – the human subject is dependent on the domain of language "whose historicity exceeds in all directions the history of the speaking subject" (1997a: 28). Being wrought by ambivalence, "the subject in speech is always both more than itself and less than itself in any given speech act" (Butler 1999: 165) as the subject is installed within and exceeds a life of discourse that, in turn, surpasses the subject's own temporality. Both exceeding and being exceeded – these are notions that imprint on the subject's ambivalent and complex location in discourse, and that have important implications for its ability to be recognised (to be comprehended and acknowledged) in social structures.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Other performative models also support such an idea of the social existence of the human subject. Within the field of sociology, a study of the social production of self marks the work of various writers who argue for an understanding of the performative constitution of individuals and collectives within specific social settings. Erving Goffman (1971), for instance, argues that the self is indebted to social performances for the maintenance of respect and trust in routine social interactions, thus implying that identity is constructed through the adoption of particular social roles. By treating identity as necessarily constituted through social interaction, he defies modernist notions of autonomous personhood. In terms of gender identity, Goffman also suggests that one "might just as well say that there is no gender identity. There is only a schedule for the portrayal of gender" (1979: 8). This model would thus suggest that the notion of a gendered self is collectively sustained through social interaction. Also see Barry Barnes (1983; 2000; 2001), Chris Brickell (2005) and Martin Kusch (1998) for departures from and adaptations of Goffman's performative model.

## 2.2.2 Precarity and Recognition: Framing Vulnerable Subjectivities

The concept of performativity as a reiterative compulsion is also developed by Butler to incorporate modes of recognition that play a fundamental role in the ‘framing’ – or social and political articulation – of the human as living organism. Butler investigates the political enunciation of power for its exclusion of populations that fall outside its normative frames, and the politically induced condition of precarity that characterises these populations. Such populations are marked by their vulnerability – their heightened risk of injury, violence, displacement and failing social and economic networks of support (2009b: ii). Butler’s notion of ‘precarity’, as formulated in *Precarious Life* (2004a) and *Frames of War* (2009a), stresses the need for formulating a “new body ontology, one that implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, bodily persistence, desire, work and the claims of language and social belonging” (2009a: 2). In these books the ‘being’ of the body is affirmed as a social ontology, implying that the concept of the ‘body’ is inevitably articulated in the political and social domain in order for it to physically persist and prosper. For it to be *recognised* as human,<sup>34</sup> specific ontologies of the subject – i.e. normative conditions for ‘personhood’ – are required for reiteration as “our very capacity to discern and name the ‘being’ of the subject is dependent on norms that facilitate that recognition” (2009a: 4). Butler contends that the actual ‘being’ of life is constituted through the operation of power; in fact, we cannot refer to ‘being’ outside the operation of power as our life “is always given over to others, to norms, to social and political organisations that have developed historically in order to maximise precariousness for some and minimise precariousness for others” (2009a: 2-3).

Power is reproduced through norms that provide a ‘frame’ for human life – Butler draws on the notion of ‘framing’ to invoke its power of both *containing* a scene/life (of delineating a recognisable inside as removed from its unintelligible outside) and of being *set up* (of evidence being presented and planted to ‘prove’ one’s guilt, to call into question one’s ‘innocence’). The frame, as a mechanism for recognition, for containing, conveying and determining what is seen (Butler 2009a: 10), is an iterable structure – like all forms of power, it needs to be circulated and reproduced in order to exert itself, in order to

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<sup>34</sup> Butler uses the term ‘recognisability’ to describe those conditions that shape a subject for recognition – those terms, categories and conventions that prepare and establish a human being to be a recognisable subject. The terms and conditions of recognisability precede the act of recognition, and these conditions induce a recognisable subject, or, conversely, determine who is not recognisable and therefore excluded from its normative framework (Butler 2009a: 4-5).

succeed as a frame. The frame delineates a deed (or a life) in order to lead the viewer, the specular human subject, to an 'inevitable' conclusion.

However, it is possible, argues Butler, to 'frame the frame' – by drawing on Trinh T Minh-ha's *Framer Framed* (1992), Butler maintains that it is possible "to call the frame into question ... to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognisable" (2009a: 8-9). The frame as a normative structure that determines the recognisability of a human subject can never completely control what we see, think, recognise or apprehend, and there is always a certain leakage – something that exceeds the frame. By using the example of war photography, Butler demonstrates that frames are contingent both on their circulation (their reiterative structure), and on a certain context that grants them authority.<sup>35</sup> However, this condition also allows for that which is framed to "get out of hand" (Butler 2009a: 10), and as the framed content breaks from its context, the frame has to invariably break from itself – it has to be reformulated as it moves across time and space in order to exert its control. The reproducibility of the frame and its performative power to be reiterated imply that the frame "does not quite contain what it conveys, but breaks apart every time it seeks to give definitive organisation to its content" (Butler 2009a: 10).

The reiterative framing of norms is characterised by both efficacy and vulnerability. Precariousness, for example, implies a manner of framing and a position of being dependent on social networks and conventions that provide the preconditions for what constitutes a liveable life. Butler claims that "we are, as it were, social beings from the start, dependent on what is outside ourselves, on others, on institutions, and on sustained and sustainable environments, and so are, in this sense, precarious" (2009a: 23). Frames provide the conditions within which life is sustained, and the structure to know and identify life – it is therefore difficult to recognise (or even understand) life outside the frames within which it is made apparent to us. However, the effectiveness of the frame as recognising apparatus is also undermined by its reiterative nature – by the danger of the unrecognisable (the outside) slipping into that which is framed (the normative inside) during its compulsory reproduction of those norms that it draws on for delineation. Within the normative function of frames rests a liability to their existence that is somewhat similar to the Derridean concept of the 'archive' insofar as its topo-nomological order (the laws that

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<sup>35</sup> Butler's argument for photographs as "structuring scenes of interpretation" (2009a: 67), and for the positions of precarity that they reproduce and complicate, is revisited in Chapter 3, where I deal specifically with the subject of photography.

govern the space of recollection) is sustained *and* threatened by its reiterative compulsion to keep. The archive exists at a point of structural breakdown (of memory made prosthetic), and it tries to hide this weakness by *being more* (that is, by replicating and supplementing its holdings). In much the same way, the Butlerian frame is concurrently undermined and exerts its power by breaking with itself and being reiterated. The Derridean archive's compulsion to shelter (1995: 3) and the Butlerian frame's impulse towards delineation are both marked by contradiction as a reproductive and counterproductive drive underline their normative function. By extending Derrida's account of the archive to Butler's formulation of the frame, I wish to highlight that each of these mechanisms "always works, and *a priori*, against itself" (Derrida 1995: 12).

It is the complex nature of both 'framing' and 'performativity', their persistent and contingent iteration of norms of power, which allows Butler to link these concepts with 'recognition' and 'precarity'. In terms of the performative nature of gender norms, Butler insists that those who do not live their gender in intelligible ways are prone to misrecognition, or non-recognition, which heightens the sense of precarity of their lives. The performative nature of gender implies that it draws on frames of power in order to determine who qualifies as a subject of recognition – it conditions "what and who will be 'legible' and what and who will not" (2009b: iii). Thus, to be a subject<sup>36</sup> entails acquiescence to certain norms that govern recognition, and that provide ontological conditions for personhood. This is a position from which Butler deduces that:

We think of subjects as the kind of beings who ask for recognition in the law or in political life; but perhaps the more important issue is how the terms of recognition – and here we can include a number of gender and sexual norms – condition in advance who will count as subject, and who will not. So it is, I would suggest, on the basis of this question, who counts as a subject and who does not, that performativity becomes linked with precarity. The performativity of gender has everything to do with who counts as a life, who can be read or understood as a living being, and who lives, or tries to live, on the far side of established modes of intelligibility. (2009b: iv)

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<sup>36</sup> Butler's definition of 'the subject' is important in this case as she distinguishes it from the idea of 'the person' or 'the individual' insofar as 'the subject' is a linguistic category or a placeholder, rather than an individual as such. "Individuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a 'site'), and they enjoy intelligibility only to the extent that they are, as it were, first established in language. The subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency. No individual becomes a subject without first becoming subjected or undergoing 'subjectivation'" (Butler 1997b: 11). Much of the critique against Butler rests, as I explain later in this chapter, on a conflation of 'the subject' with 'the person', thereby assuming that Butler denies the material realities of the human being by arguing that existence is purely linguistic. As Butler demonstrates in her definition of the subject, this is a misconception.

Not only is Butler concerned with the conditions that allow for certain subjectivities to be recognisable, but also with the extent to which subjects are in fact recognised. As the status of being recognised can never be finalised – there is no conclusion to being recognised, but it is part of a repetitive process – so too the desire for recognition can never be completely fulfilled (Butler 2009b: iv). In this regard, recognition is tied to the reiterative disposition of identity as it is based on the repetition of certain frames in order to be rendered intelligible.

To be recognised or to be rendered precarious – these concepts are of great importance for my own investigation of the identities of the three trans participants of this study as their conceptions of self lie at the intersection of recognition and precarity. Being framed – that is, being delineated, categorised and interpellated as a subject – is central to the performative nature of gender, and this is also the case for these three men. In addition, Butler's formulation of precarity allows for a social dimension to supplement the reiterative working of gender performativity inasmuch as she presents precarity as a condition of being rendered vulnerable (to an Other), whether it is because one is not recognised as a subject, or because one does not fit a certain normative framework. The social dimension of performativity and precarity, as well as the reiterative (and largely ambivalent) nature of framing is addressed in the following section, when I investigate the relevance of Butler's work to a trans context. Butler's work has prompted a wide array of responses and has received severe criticism, especially with regards to the degree of agency that she allows for within her performative framework, and some of the main debates are unpacked in order to determine the relevance of Butler's work to the conceptual make-up and lives of trans men.

## **2.2.3 Intersecting Butler: Locating Trans Men in a Performative Schema**

### **2.2.3.1 A Brief Summary of Critiques of Butlerian Performativity**

Despite the monumental influence of Butler on the contemporary conceptualisation of gender, no discussion of her work can bypass the severe criticism that has also been provoked by her treatment of the human subject, particularly by her early articulation of performativity.<sup>37</sup> Butler's claim that all identity is performative is a central point of

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<sup>37</sup> In fact, writings on and critiques of her work have established 'Butler' as a trope that came to signify the rejection of agency, and her name has become discursive shorthand for the performative nature of gender identities. For this reason, 'Butler' is often invoked in academic and popular writings as the discursive

contention for those who take issue with what they regard as her absolute foreclosure of the human subject's agency. Seyla Benhabib, for example, criticises Butler's theory of performativity for inevitably leading to what she perceives to be the subject's self-incoherence, a state where it is impossible to locate any 'self' behind the performative 'mask' (Benhabib *et al.* 1995: 21-22).<sup>38</sup> The apparent loss of agency at the cost of a performative identity is an issue of great concern among various critics of Butler's work, be it in writings dealing with women's rights (Fraser in Benhabib 1995; Glick 2000), gay agency (Cohen 1991; Green 2002), or transsexual embodiment (Namaste 1996, 2000; Prosser 1998), to name but a few.

While some of Butler's critics see her earlier work as a deliberate move to dislocate agency and the political platforms needed for its mobilisation, others blame her for providing a performative schema that is as overbearing and coagulated as essentialist notions of identity. Toril Moi (1999), and John Hood Williams and Wendy Harrison (1998), for example, are critical of Butler's location of the subject as entrenched within grids of power, particularly as they regard gender performativity as an ontology that is as foundationalist as the notion of a stable, coherent subject. Susan Bordo (1993: 291) even goes as far as accusing Butler of offering "discursive or linguistic foundationalism as the highest critical court, the clarifying, demystifying and liberating Truth". For Bordo, "Butler's world is one in which language swallows everything up, voraciously, a theoretical pasta-machine through which categories of competing frameworks are pressed and reprocessed as 'tropes'" (1993: 291). This sentiment is also echoed by Peter Digeser's (1994) argument that Butler's account of the gendered body as a "pure performative" runs the danger of both simplifying and eclipsing the material manifestations of gender.<sup>39</sup>

The supposed omission of the 'real' in Butler's description of performativity is of central concern for various writers. Butler is often critiqued for her lack of attention to the

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antithesis of individualist agency, and it has taken on a spectral form as it haunts the various texts in which the name is signed or cited.

<sup>38</sup> This argument shows a collapse of performativity into performance that is commonly found amongst writers who claim that the subject is necessary for political and social mobilisation, and that to deny the agency of the human subject would amount to depriving fragile and marginalised communities of a sense of selfhood – see Salih (2002: 68-69) for a discussion of this debate. Such a debate not only shows a critical misreading of Butlerian performativity, but it also fails to take into account that Butler argues that *all* identity is performative, meaning that both the marginalised and those who enjoy normative privilege share a complex and ambiguous relation to forms of agency.

<sup>39</sup> Digeser is critical of what he identifies as Butler's attempt to demonstrate "that the categories of gender, sex, and the self are not expressive of our bodies or natures; rather, they are merely the results of socially governed performances" (1994: 655). This argument shows a common misreading of Butler's theory of performativity as ignorant of the human body.

everyday and/or historical aspects that regulate the social production of gender; be it as a result of inattentiveness to historical and social contingencies (Hausman 1995: 179; Dollimore 1996: 533-555), or because of the high level of theoretical abstraction that runs through her work and that deprives her study of gender of real-life examples (Speer & Potter 2002). With her work often condemned for not being adequately grounded in social and/or political contingencies, Butler is taken to task for the relevance of performativity when applied outside a poststructuralist (or a textual) setting. The highly discursive nature of performativity is specifically queried for its seeming abandonment of the active body in favour of modes of literary and philosophical enquiry (Case 1996: 17). It is, however, important to note that these criticisms are predominantly lodged against Butler's earlier work, particularly *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, in which the situatedness of the human subject is not always as emphatically underscored as in her more recent work. For example, Lynne Segal (2008) and Kaye Mitchell (2008) have both highlighted what they identify as a more agential tenor that is surfacing in Butler's writing as her later work, especially *Frames of War* and *Precarious Lives*, foregrounds the sociality of the self, its ethical obligations to others, and the manner in which such relations and obligations to an Other constitute a sense of selfhood.<sup>40</sup>

Another criticism that is often lodged against Butler's earlier work is her so-called treatment of the body as a predominantly conceptual problem – Ed Cohen, for example, reads her work as a deliberate collapse of the body onto the surface of discourse by moving gender “out of the depths” of the body (1991: 83).<sup>41</sup> Susan Bordo supports Butler's enquiry into modes of cultural hegemony that impose norms on the body, but is critical of Butler's treatment of the body as “pure text” – something that Bordo describes as an effacement of the materiality of the body that is played out “in our postmodern imagination of the body as malleable plastic” (1993: 38). Even though Bordo miscasts Butler's position as

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<sup>40</sup> According to Mitchell, Butler's work shows a change of emphasis (and not necessarily a complete change of concept, as such), as her accentuation of the human subject has shifted from an “impression of the paucity of individual agency, to a more hopeful and ethical view of collectivity and responsibility” (2008: 418-419). For both Mitchell (2008) and Segal (2008), the human subject's relationship with norms of power is underscored by Butler as an ambivalent relationship, but that does not imply that the subject is completely stripped of agency – an important point that I return to later in this chapter.

<sup>41</sup> Cohen's main criticism is that Butler risks invoking a somatic idealisation of the body as a variable boundary by displacing somatic materiality onto discursive processes (1991: 83-84). This is particularly problematic for Cohen as any attempt to embody and enact political (e)motion is seemingly elided by Butler's “evacuation” of the body. Identity politics as the political mobilisation of a ‘we’, of communal identities in (a) movement, is apparently constrained by Butler, and as Cohen argues “how individuals come together to act for change, how these actors are changed by their activities, and how these acts and actors crystallise as movements cannot be adequately imagined if the powerful effects *felt* by acting subjects are ‘theoretically’ disappeared” (1991: 84, emphasis in original).

“celebratory postmodernism”,<sup>42</sup> her objection to Butler’s radical discursivity at the cost of bodily experiences is picked up by various authors who feel that Butler’s account of performative gender lacks a material dimension and real-life situatedness. Barbara Epstein (1995), Carrie Hull (1997), Toril Moi (1999) and Carrie Noland (2009) also contend that Butler’s analysis of performativity and the social construction of gender lacks what they identify as a material dimension, particularly as they believe that the human body is not adequately foregrounded in Butler’s analysis of sex.

However, Butler’s investigation of gender and sex is not ignorant of the material body – in fact, as my discussion of performativity and its material/cultural manifestation has shown, Butler is very much aware of the materiality of the body (see also Salih 2002: 144). To claim that Butler’s agenda is overtly concerned with programmatic “antibiologism”, as Bordo insists (1993: 290), is unfair and runs the danger of demonising Butler as a material denialist who is ignorant of human suffering and out of touch with reality. Butler does claim, nonetheless, that the body is always *given* in a certain way as it is presented through certain discursive modes, and that codes of gender play a fundamental role in our conception of the human body.<sup>43</sup> In the following section the implications of such a perspective on the embodiment of gender are addressed as they specifically relate to the identities and bodies of trans men and women. In addition, I revisit some of the questions that were identified around the degree of agency, forms of social locatedness and modes of embodiment that Butler’s notion of gender performativity allows for by positioning it within a trans framework.

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<sup>42</sup> Bordo’s interest in the cultural locatedness and materiality of the body leads her to question what she perceives to be the “postmodern intoxication with possibilities” through which the body (as a textual mode) can be changed by the meanings we choose (1993: 138-39). Butler is placed within such a theoretical discourse as Bordo interprets gender performativity as an account of the body as text that leads to an overly abstract (and thus decontextualised and a-historical) notion of the gendered body. Bordo argues that such a decontextualised notion of gender sides with a postmodern agenda to emphasise creative agency and celebrate resistance – an argument that is problematic, in my opinion, both for its very narrow reading of postmodernism, as well as its misinterpretation of Butler’s notion of performativity and gender parody as necessarily indicative of agency. See also Susan Hekman (1998) for a discussion of the similarities and differences between Bordo’s and Butler’s work.

<sup>43</sup> As Gail Weiss argues “to view the materiality of the body as a cultural *acquisition*, as Butler does, does not mean that the materiality of the body is purely a cultural *creation*” (author’s emphasis, 1999: 76). For Weiss, Butler’s treatment of the body demonstrates a simultaneous affirmation of its irreducible materiality and the ways in which the body is “always already” invested with cultural significance (ibid.).



### 2.2.3.2 A Trans Interrogation of Performative Gender

The location of gender as a somatic experience appears to be of great concern for people writing about, or from, a trans position, especially as such an experience relates to discourses surrounding transsexual and/or transgender embodiment.<sup>44</sup> Even though the participants of this study prefer to situate themselves as trans men (and not exclusively as ‘transsexual’ or ‘transgender’ per se), some of the discourses surrounding transsexuality and transgenderism have strong repercussions for how these participants negotiate themselves on a practical and discursive level. The distinction between transgender and transsexual is of importance to my thesis insofar as the research participants of this study are more aligned with a transsexual understanding of self – they largely uphold a binary conception of gender, and they are either in the process or have already undergone sex reassignment surgery. Yet the category of ‘transsexual’ does not really resonate with their conception of self, as they are more orientated towards an understanding of themselves as ‘trans men’, or specifically, as ‘trans’ and/or ‘men’, depending on the context within which they find themselves. Their experience and display of ‘being trans’, of disidentifying with the gender roles assigned to them at birth, is not a clear-cut phenomenon, but is based on a range of variables and expressions.

One of the discourses that impacts on these participants is the purported ability of trans identities to provide a means of normative gender transgression – an idea that has increasingly received academic attention from the late 1970s onwards. Janice Raymond’s *Transsexual Empire* (1979) is one such text that deals with the hypothetically transgressive potential of transgender identities, with her argument for transsexuals being the ultimate “dupes” of patriarchal gender sparking much debate and controversy.<sup>45</sup> Despite its

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<sup>44</sup> The term ‘transgender’ is often understood as a political positioning that draws on postmodern notions of gender fluidity (Roen 2002: 501), while it also refers to a person who disidentifies with the gender roles or sex assigned at birth and who moves between/beyond conventional notions of male and female. Transgender is also used as a collective category that includes an array of male- and female-bodied gender-variant people, such as transsexuals, transvestites and intersex people (Valentine 2007: 4). The term ‘transsexual’, which originated in the medical and psychological context, is specifically used to refer to people who (may) seek medical treatment (such as sex reassignment surgery) to bring their body and gender identity into alignment (Morgan *et al.* 2009: 7), and who try to “pass” as members of the opposite sex (Shapiro 2005: 139).

<sup>45</sup> Raymond played an undeniable role in the development of discourses around transgender/transsexual studies as even a cursory reading of important books and articles on trans issues will reveal her scathing attack of transsexuals to be drawn into disrepute, commented on, or at least referenced (see, for example, Bornstein 1995; Califia 1997; Elliot 2010; Feinberg 1996; Hausman 1995; Mason-Schrock 1996; Prosser 1998; Shapiro 2005; Stone 1991; Whittle 2005 and Wickman 2001, to name but a few). The supposed gender conservatism of transsexuals has also been reflected in other early writings on the subject, such as Thomas Kando’s claim that transsexuals are essentially conformist and unliberated (1973), and Dwight B. Billings and Thomas Urban’s lamentation of transsexuals being “tamed” and relinquishing their “potential wildcat strike at the gender factory” (1982: 278).

notoriety, this text instigated renewed enquiry into transgender and transsexual experiences, particularly into the perceived differences between the two terms. Sandy Stone (1991), for example, argues that transgender subjects should reclaim the complexities and ambiguities, the “myriad of alterities” (1991: 299) of their identities, instead of limiting their conception of self to “wrong body” narratives.<sup>46</sup> Kate Bornstein (1995) echoes some of Stone’s sentiments by encouraging “gender outlaws” to deconstruct, rather than incarnate, normative gender categories, thus drawing a distinction between what she perceives to be transgender dissent and transsexual compliance. Leslie Feinberg (1996: 4, 10) also calls for a more open-ended approach to trans identities than the “pink or blue tinted gender categories” that society prescribes. The opposition between transgender and transsexual agendas is also highlighted by Riki Ann Wilchins’s (2002) call for a “genderqueer” interrogation of the supposedly normative embodiment of gender codes by transsexual subjects.<sup>47</sup> The growing complexity and heterogeneity of trans experiences is reflected, according to Patricia Elliot (2010), in the rift between transgender and transsexual conceptions and theorisations of self, with the former increasingly linked to queer destabilisations of gender, while the latter is frequently framed as the more conservative, gender-compliant alternative (see also Halberstam 2005; Roen 2002; Stryker 1998).

In debates on trans identities, queer is frequently proffered as a politically progressive response to biological essentialism, particularly to transsexual experiences of gender embodiment (Elliot 2010: 36-37). As political, social and/or cultural discourse, queer is concerned (inter alia) with aspects of sexual transgression, with the rejection of fixed conceptions of identity, and a questioning of the normative readings and applications of both gender and sexuality. Queer is strongly opposed to essentialist and universalist claims about gender identity, and is suspicious of identity politics that hinges power on the concepts of ‘coherency’ and ‘autonomy’ (see Cooper 1996; Seidman 1996; Walters 2005). By questioning the mostly dichotomous gender and sexual definitions proscribed by normative society, queer aims to lay bare systems of normative identification (Van Zyl 2005: 23). In effect, queer is not only the critical breakdown of gender classification, but encompasses a wider range of transgressions as it also “has to be understood as the result,

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<sup>46</sup> The ‘wrong body’ trope is commonly used in narratives on trans men and women, and it often provides a means of access to sex reassignment surgery (see for example Hausman 1995; Prosser 1998; Mason-Schrock 1996) – this phenomenon is investigated in more depth in Chapter 4, when I discuss specific narratives of embodiment and their visual manifestation in photography.

<sup>47</sup> See also Wilchins (1997) for a discussion on gender freedom and her plea for the right to choose and construct the gender of one’s choice, as well as Bernice Hausman (2001) and Cressida Heyes (2000) for a critique of Wilchins’s, Bornstein’s and Feinberg’s move towards what they describe as gender voluntarism.

in the domain of sexuality, of the (post)modern encounter with – and rejection of – Enlightenment views concerning the role of the conceptual, normative, progressive, liberatory, revolutionary ... in social change” (Morton 1995: 370).

Certain aspects of queer theory are prone to more critique than others when used to account for transsexual identities. Viviane Ki Namaste (2005) reads queer, for example, as a demand for locating oneself outside gender binaries, while Henry Rubin (1998) and Jay Prosser (1998) share the sentiment that it is often assumed that being trans is necessarily concerned with the queering of gender, and that this places an unfair burden on transsexuals to oppose the very gender categories that they seek to embody. Elliot (2010) reads Prosser’s, Namaste’s and Rubin’s critiques of queer as a response to its elision of their “desire for the ordinary”, and these desires, “unlike those of most women and men, are hard won and deserving of respect” (Elliot 2010: 38). Queer, as an extensive questioning of assimilationism and conventional gender and/or sexual norms (see for example Epstein 1996; Halperin 1995, 2003; Kumashiro 2002; Warner 1993, 1999), is often read as a discourse that is barbed with overt and implied criticism of transsexual identities.

At the same time, ‘queer’ as umbrella term – as a synonym for *lgbti* identities – is also criticised for its overemphasis of unity at the cost of trans diversity (Prosser 1998; Shelly 2008), while the queer alignment of transgender studies as theoretical discourse is blamed for its elision of the material realities and subjectivities of transsexual people (Yep 2003: 42-43; Elliot and Roen 1998).<sup>48</sup> The fascination with trans identities as vehicles for queer transgression is seen, for example, in Thomas Piontek’s call for transsexuals as “queer border dwellers” to provide possible queer alternatives to essentialist definitions of gender (Piontek 2006: 80). Piontek perceives queer theory to be instrumental in questioning the normative relationship between sex and gender, and he draws on Butler to demonstrate that “transsexuals and other gender queers” live their lives outside the cultural matrix of

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<sup>48</sup> This critique of queer theory is not limited to transsexual modes of embodiment, but shows a general concern “that queer theorists, in their radical nominalism, ignore the material world of actual persons and relationships, preferring instead to focus on grammatical and semantic analysis of texts and on conditions of reception-consumption, thereby drawing attention away from economic inequity and actual relationships of exploitation” (Smith 2003: 347). The textual idealism of queer is highlighted by various authors (see Epstein 1996; Halperin 2003; Seidman 1993), who are troubled by its abstraction of the realities of everyday life and complex cultural codes. See also Susanna Walters (2005) for a critique of queer as inconsistent and purposefully elusive, as well as José Esteban Muñoz (1999), Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson (2005), and Jarrod Hayes (2000) for post-colonial interrogations of queer and its perpetuation of whiteness as normative category in mainstream Western culture as well as its insensitivity towards racial inequalities and cultural differences.

intelligibility as their gender does not follow from their sex (2006: 79). For all its flaws,<sup>49</sup> Piontek's book reflects a general academic interest in transgender and/or transsexual identities for providing insight into the normative and reiterative nature of gender categories, and for supplying possible alternatives to these categories. This text also shows how both Butler and queer theory are often drawn upon (and amalgamated) when dealing with issues surrounding trans identities and their embodiment.

Butler is identified as emblematic of the 'queer turn' (see, for example, Epstein 1996; O'Driscoll 1996; Warner 1993; Wickman 2001), especially as her early work contributed largely to the field of queer theory. Butler's work triggered profound interest in the normative entrenchment of codes of gender, particularly amongst scholars who reference and appropriate transgender as a "postmodern brand of radicalism" and a means to trouble the bipolarity of gender systems (Wickman 2001: 23; see also Boswell 1997; Bolin 1988 & 1994; Califia 1997; Ramet 1996; Stryker 1998), or who present transgender as a prime example of performative gender norms (Hausman 1995; McKenna & Kessler 1978). As such, investigations of trans identities reflect a burgeoning interest from the 1990s onwards in gender scholarship in the corporeal manifestation of gender (Wickman 2001: 15), with Butler's notion of performativity playing an integral part in these investigations.

Parallel to the above-mentioned studies, several voices have emerged to purposefully distance transsexual identities from a queer (and, by implication, a performative) theorisation of gender, and to trouble the assumption that transsexual identities have somehow 'failed' their queerer transgender counterparts – most noticeably, by Namaste (1996; 2000; 2005), Rubin (1998; 2003) and Prosser (1998). Namaste offers an extensive review of the silence that pervades queer theory around transsexual experiences – ranging from a critique of queer theory for its alleged insensitivity to everyday transgendered lives to its methodological presuppositions of authority (2000: 22-23), her work presents a case for the "tragic misreading" of both transsexual and transgender lives by scholars who write from a queer perspective. Butler is specifically singled out for what Namaste considers to be her narrow application of poststructuralism – not only is Butler

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<sup>49</sup> Piontek's argument is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, it is assumed that people who identify as transsexual are necessarily "gender queers" who strive for a non-normative (that is, non-binary) conception of gender, while it also conflates transgender with transsexual identities – an oversight that, amidst the contemporary debate about the difference between the terms, reflects the generalising and cursory nature of his investigation into trans identities. Secondly, it posits transsexuality as an experience that is outside of any cultural matrix, that is both free from gender-proscriptive discourses and that is not intelligible because it occupies this queer locality. This shows an oversimplification of both Butler's theory of gender performativity and of the life experiences of trans men and women.

reproached for her cursory examination of the social practices in which gender is embedded, but also for her failure to expand poststructuralism from a theoretical context to its social manifestation within the lives of specific trans subjects. Namaste challenges the queer slant of Butler's work by insisting that, "whereas poststructuralism suggests that we need to cite the social and institutional operations that produce subjects, Butler advocates a type of inquiry that does not explain these relations between the object and its discourse" (2000: 21).<sup>50</sup> Butler is treated as synonymous with queer theory, and Namaste scathingly rebukes the queer slant of Butler's work for its apparent casting of trans people as objects of academic discourse.

In the same vein, Rubin's concern is with the appropriation of transsexuals for promoting a queer agenda, which burdens them with the unreasonable demand of finding a "revolutionary" way of "overthrowing gender or imagining what to replace it with" (1998: 273), as well as the erasure of subjective trans experiences at the cost of queer political objectives. Rubin is particularly apprehensive of the "appropriation of transsexuals by nontranssexual queers" (1998: 275-276) – queers who frequently cast transsexuals as deluded for not accepting the performative nature of their identity and rather clinging to notions of a biologically determined gender identity. Likewise, Prosser defends the transsexual right of 'being' as a legitimate (i.e. non-queer, non-performative) mode of life by arguing that "transgendered subjectivity is not inevitably queer" and that "there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, to be" (1998: 31-32, emphasis in original).<sup>51</sup> For Prosser, "there is much about transsexuality that must remain irreconcilable to queer: the specificity of transsexual experience; the importance of the flesh to self; the difference between sex and gender

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<sup>50</sup> According to Namaste, Butler detours from the poststructuralism practised by Foucault and Derrida as the latter examined the social institutions that produce subjects, while Butler does not offer an analysis that is adequately rooted in the historical, economic and social settings of the subjects that she studies (2000: 22). This, argues Namaste, is typical of queer theory, as it fails to consider that its "selection of texts is a social process that embodies the production of knowledge and discourses on sexual and gendered objects" (2000: 22). By aligning Butler with queer theory, Namaste makes a case for a social and self-reflexive 'blindness' that seemingly pervades Butler's own theoretical practices. As I argue later in this section, Butler's work takes on a significantly social dimension in her writings on precarity, while even her earlier work has a very strong self-reflexive dimension as she is aware of her own subjective bearing in her writing and she constantly revisits previous arguments in a critical, open-ended manner. Butler's treatment of specifically trans(sexual) identities is, however, quite vague at times, or even ignorant of the voices of trans writers who offer alternative perspectives on the subject of trans embodiment (see, for example, Butler 2001, 2004b) and in this regard Namaste's reading of Butler is justified. Also see Trish Salah (2007: 153) and Elliot (2010: 42-48) for a discussion of Butler's failure to engage or acknowledge trans authors who have critiqued her work.

<sup>51</sup> In this regard, Prosser's interpretation of 'performativity' seems to move towards a (mis)understanding of this concept as synonymous with 'performance', where the notion of 'being' is regarded as a centre from which a subject can choose not to 'perform', not to be superfluous or acting, but merely 'to be'. As I have previously pointed out, this call for locating a stable subject within/in opposition to a performative schema seems to indicate a misreading of Butler's work as a complete denial of human agency.

identity; the desire to pass as ‘real-ly gendered’ in the world without trouble” (1998: 59). Prosser takes issue with what he identifies as two elisions in Butler’s work on gender performativity, namely embodiment and narrative, and he presents these concepts as situated in a social poststructuralist framework that simultaneously emphasises the role of language and of materiality in the embodiment of transsexual identity. The body is a prime site of investigation for Prosser, and he departs from Butler’s assertion that “there is no body prior to its marking ... we can never tell the story of how a body comes to be marked by the category of sex” (1993: 98) by arguing for the transsexual body to be the actual “seat” of the self and the place from which transsexual narratives can take poststructuralism (and, by implication Butler) to task by actually telling their “untellable story” of gendered becoming (Prosser 1998: 67). Prosser specifically uses the term “body narrative” to depart from Butler’s account of performativity, and Hausman’s (1995) subsequent employment thereof,<sup>52</sup> to argue that transsexual narratives of self are organised forms of textual exchange that lead to the realisation of identity and a sex-changed body (1998: 105). Prosser’s account aims to wrest the transsexual subject from a performative position to reinstate its narrative constitution as an author of history and a creator of a gendered body.

Prosser’s account of transsexual “body narratives” is undermined by several unaddressed contradictions;<sup>53</sup> however, it is invaluable for stressing the complex refiguring of

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<sup>52</sup> Hausman draws on performativity insofar as she links it to the reiteration of medical discourses in the construction of the transsexual body. The main problem with Hausman’s argument is, however, that she uses a medical perspective to cast ‘the transsexual’ as an object and trope that is worthy of scrutiny and critical deconstruction. She uses this perspective in a roundabout fashion to supposedly address discourses on identity construction rather than people as such, which leads her to the conclusion that “while in the end I am critical of the phenomenon of transsexualism, I hope it is clear that I do not (cannot) condemn transsexuals themselves” (1995: xi). Her work has been criticised for using a positivist approach to further an anti-transsexual agenda (Namaste 2000: 34-35), for promoting transphobia (Prosser 1998: 8), and for assuming “that she, as a self-styled feminist scholar, should have greater authority over transsexual embodiment than transsexual people themselves” (Whittle & Stryker 2006: 335). What is important to note here is that discourses on identity – be they medical discourses, poststructuralist accounts, or even performativity – are often used (and misapplied) to present the transsexual body as subservient and compliant to the gaze of the investigator/scholar. In the case of Hausman’s work, her investigation of medical discourses on transsexualism may be thorough, but it is overtly tainted by the very discourses that she aims to destabilise, namely the medical assumption that certain ‘abnormalities’ can be ‘cured’, and that the researcher is obligated to find the cause of a problem and solve it.

<sup>53</sup> Prosser’s attempt to defend transsexual identities from queer appropriation, and his insistence on the materiality of the body, has been lauded by several writers for investing a sense of realness in trans identities (see Elliot 2010; Heyes 2000; Halberstam 1998). However, Prosser has also been criticised for taking this argument too far, for denying any queerness in transsexual identities, and for a fundamentalist reinstatement of identity essentialism (Heyes 2000; Halberstam 1998; Hausman 2001). Heyes (2000: 176-177) draws attention, for example, to Prosser’s insistence that the transsexual subject is an autonomous author of his/her own narrative, while he argues at the same time that this narrative is inevitably shaped and engineered in response to various discursive structures and hegemonic institutions. Even though Prosser aims to distance himself from a Butlerian understanding of agency as ambivalent, his own response seems to bear striking similarities to such a viewpoint. Butler’s analysis (2005b) of the subject as socially located within, and as constituted by narrative processes, might, on the face of it, seem to foreclose an idea of human agency

transsexual identities that occur along corporeal, psychic and symbolic axes. “Gendered becoming, becoming a man or a woman, occurs for the transsexual at these *points of intersection*, complex crossings for sure but the investment of sex in the flesh is undeniable” (Prosser 1998: 67, my emphasis). Even though Prosser does not manage to resolve the various confusions that form part of his account of the body’s resistance to cultural inscription, a task that he admits is only undertaken with “humbling tentativeness” (1998: 7), he still makes a convincing case for the lack of attention that is often paid to embodiment in discourses around transsexual identity. Prosser’s work also reveals a common thread that runs through various texts on transsexuality, namely, the reclamation of bodily experiences. Be it in the scathing attack on transsexuals in Raymond’s work (1979), accounts of transsexuality as a medical invention and a product of scientific discourses (Hausman 1995; Billings & Urban 1982), or even the notion of the historically engineered/performative subject (Butler 1990, 1993), transsexuality is explicitly or implicitly referenced as an identity that is created through discourse, with a body that is subservient to narrative. Even though discourse plays a fundamental role in the establishment of identity and it is necessarily manifested in certain ways on the body, as Prosser admits, it is still important to acknowledge that the experience of embodiment is central to transsexual life, and that transsexuality has a strong material component in its manifestation and an overt bodily reference in its discursive constitution.

### **2.2.3.3 Points of Connection and Recuperation**

Instead of trying to locate gender as a purely somatic experience, or arguing for its linguistic hegemony – both being lines of reasoning that can easily limit the discussion of gender to an either/or scenario – an investigation of embodiment and identity as intersectional seems to provide a more nuanced alternative to the complex debates raised thus far. The objective of this line of reasoning is not to resolve the contradictions that lie in the divergent conceptualisations of gender (be it as performative or embodied), or even to reduce the complexity that suffuses this term, but rather to identify important nodes where both the linguistic and material aspects of trans identities are reflected.

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and of narrative coherency, yet it does allow for an understanding that a human subject cannot fully account for himself/herself through discourse. Prosser’s formulation of “body narratives” can thus be supplemented in this regard by arguing that any discursive dealing with the human and its body is necessarily tied to larger frames of thought, yet, this does not imply that the very materiality of the body is completely accounted for or can be denied on a linguistic level.



I draw on a definition of gender as achieved through social interaction and as a space of intersection; implying that gender is largely enacted in ways that are socially understandable, and that various discourses and practices need to be considered when investigating its social and/or somatic materialisation (see for example Gagné et al 1997; Lorber 1994; Shapiro 2005; West & Fenstermaker 1995). Accordingly, it can be argued that “gender is achieved at the interactional level, reified at the cultural level, and institutionally enforced via the family, law, religion, politics, economy, medicine, and the media (Gagné et al. 1997: 479). In her reading of Butler’s formulation of performativity and precarity, Salah (2007) argues that any conception of gender and sexual difference must also acknowledge the social, biological and symbolic registers that simultaneously inform and complicate its configuration, while Namaste (2005) argues that a conversant conceptualisation of modes of trans embodiment should acknowledge the complex social and political processes that are bound to their manifestation. Prosser (1998: 67) is similarly aware of gender as bound to levels of intersection – to spaces where the somatic, psychic and symbolic simultaneously draw on and affect one another.

The social and interactional dimension of gender is also emphasised by Butler, especially in her later work, as she sees the body as socially sustained through language. In conjunction with the material existence of the body, it is also socially maintained through discursive interaction, with both material and social properties underlying the body’s existence (1997a: 5). If the body is partially sustained through language – through codes of gender, for example – it also means that the body can be threatened by linguistic structures as language can render it vulnerable and marginalised. Language can be the cause of the body’s precariousness, argues Butler, and this “shared condition of precariousness implies that the body is constitutively social and interdependent” (2009a: 31).

Butler’s analysis of gender and embodiment is not fundamentally set to demonstrate the body to be *only* a discursive surface (a schema without any depth) as many would suggest, especially when dealing with her earlier work.<sup>54</sup> As later discussions of specifically trans embodiment reveal, Butler would revisit her formulation of somatic experiences to argue that the relationship between body and gender cannot be regarded as fixed in a positivist

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<sup>54</sup> Prosser is perhaps one of the most vocal critics in this regard, and in his systematic analysis of Butler’s use (and misquotation) of Freud to emphasise the “phantasmatic nature of desire [that] reveals the body not as its ground or cause, but as its occasion and its object” (Butler 1990: 71, emphasis in original), he exposes a conflation of corporeal materiality with imaginary projection (Prosser 1998: 40-42). In his analysis of *Gender Trouble* (1990), Prosser claims the book is not only presenting a superficial reading of transsexual identity, but is also using transsexuality “to exemplify not the constitutive significance of somatic feeling but the reverse, the phantasmatic status of sex: the notion that pleasure exceeds material body parts” (1998: 43).



sense, but that the body is comprehended in terms of how it is lived and imagined (2005a: 17). In this sense, Butler highlights the trans body as a site that is often fraught with precarity (2000: 347; 2005a: 18; 2009b: i-ii) – a location that is necessarily social and often rendered vulnerable in its somatic realisation of gender. As Butler maintains, “gender is a passionate comportment, a way of living the body *with and for others*” (2009b: xii, my emphasis). This social dimension is of the utmost importance as it allows for recognising gender as embodied at an interactional level, at the intersection of the biological, the social and the discursive.<sup>55</sup>

The idea of gender as a socio-somatic experience is, however, complicated by the degree of agency that is allocated to the subject who draws on interactional experiences in the construction of his/her gender. This has been highlighted by the range of authors (such as Prosser and Namaste) who specifically deal with trans identities and who try to repudiate what they perceive as Butler’s denial of agency in her formulation of the human subject. As Butler’s earlier work often underplays the notion of agency and emphasises the opacity of this concept when applied to the human subject (Mitchell 2008: 419), it is understandable that such responses surface in trans writings, especially as the concept of ‘agency’ has currency in political, social and medical settings. For this reason ‘agency’ as a term still serves as a discursive instrument to fight for recognition and avoid precarity. While Butler may rightfully foreground the complexity that pervades any conception of agency, it is also important to take into account that this term still enjoys a degree of privilege in everyday society insofar as it speaks of an experience of empowerment that is desired by those whose lives are rendered precarious. Butler’s treatment of agency as convoluted and difficult implies that it is *convoluted for all*, yet, those who live in conditions of extreme precarity may feel that there is more at stake for them in the legitimacy and stability of this term than for those who (already) enjoy the normative sanctioning of their identities. For this reason, the experience of agency can be of the utmost importance for people whose lives are rendered precarious, not only because of their own position in a gendered framework, but also because of equally important issues surrounding religion, race, class,

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<sup>55</sup> A similar position is taken by Weiss who argues for the “intercorporeal existence” of the human being (1999: 3). Weiss maintains that “to describe embodiment as intercorporeality is to emphasise that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interaction with other human and nonhuman bodies” (1993: 5). Such a state of intercorporeality is underscored, argues Weiss, by the multiplicity of body images that are co-present in any given individual, and “which are themselves constructed through a series of corporeal exchanges that take place both within and outside of specific bodies (1993: 2). Despite the fluidity and multiplicity that often affect body images, they are central to the production (and imagining) of bodily integrity and, throughout times of bodily change, such images provide flexible frames of stability (1993: 18). At the same time factors such as race, class, sex and gender all have interlocking influences on the body image (1993: 43), which suggests the notion of embodiment to be constituted by interrelated and complex modes of experience.

employment and income – factors that I touch on in Chapter 4 when I deal with various discourses and everyday issues that have bearing on the participants' accounts of self.

Butler's formulation of power and subjectivity is not presented as a resolved or uncomplicated answer to the question of agency – instead of arguing for the subject to be either the effect or the producer of power, Butler underscores ambivalence that lies at the centre of any conception of agency: “[t]he subject is itself a site of this ambivalence in which the subject emerges both as the *effect* of a prior power and as the *condition* of *possibility* for a radically conditioned form of agency” (Butler 1997b: 15, emphasis in original). The question of who or what is doing the ‘enacting’ points, according to Butler, both to the power prior to the subject and the subject itself, neither of which is reducible to the other. Butler tries to steer clear of relegating the question of agency to a binary conception of the subject *either* being fatalistically rendered obsolete, *or* cast as a positivist site of self-determining power. Instead, she presents the subject as a site that is situated at a crossroads (1997b: 18), at a point of intersection between being determined by power and determining power. Rather than trying to resolve the contradiction that marks the conception and embodiment of human subjectivity, a move that Butler regards as a way to reduce the complexity that pervades its linguistic-somatic occasion, she underscores ambivalence as central to its reiterative manifestation.

For the purpose of this thesis, such an understanding of agency as ambivalent is important as it allows for the recognition of the divergent and sometimes conflicting discourses that have a bearing on trans subjectivities and, in particular, on the idea and expression of being a trans man. The research participants of this study, for example, draw on, enunciate and visualise various discourses of self that sometimes stand in opposition to one another – the notion of a pre-social self, of a coherent, differently gendered subject that existed before transition or even from birth, is one example of a narrative that is visually manifested, and that runs parallel with a more performative understanding of gender as a norm that is inevitably reiterated. Judging from my experience with the participants of this study, codes of gender are seen as frames of reference that are necessarily drawn upon, while they are also seen as tools that can be utilised to occupy a more stable idea of self.

When describing their gender identities, the participants highlight both the stability and changeability, the autonomy and interconnectedness of these identities. For Munir, his masculinity is a stable frame of reference that he experiences as being both *outside* and *inside* himself; it is something that he aspired *to take on* and *to express* ever since he was a

child (Personal Interview). His conception of what masculinity entails is, however, something that has also changed over the years – something that *came about*. As Munir states:

I have pretty much known since childhood what I wanted to look like and at a later stage I obviously *came to realise* that a male consists of this and of that. It was always, at the beginning of my process, important to me that I should have a penis because it makes me a man, but as the years went by it didn't matter to me anymore because this is what I have *always* wanted to look like, this is what I *always* presented and this is what people see, and I am accepted as is. (Personal Interview, my emphasis)

Charl's interpretation of his own gender identity is intricately tied to an awareness of the impact that social and cultural norms have on his conception of self. In Charl's opinion, his identity is tied to processes of social interaction, of “figuring” himself out through his contact with other people (Personal Interview). While such processes provide the impetus for change within Charl's frame of identification, they are also wrought by normative discourses and expectation. As Charl argues:

When I regarded myself as a butch lesbian, it was very difficult for me to accept that, because of the society and the culture in which I grew up. Being homosexual was an absolute no-no. It made me terribly rebellious, but it left me with a lot of guilt as well. When I discovered that I am not butch, that I am actually trans, it lifted a lot of the guilt for me, because now I could go through life being heterosexual and not homosexual, and heterosexual was accepted. (Personal Interview)

In Robert's opinion, a degree of change also shows up in his own conception of self – it forms part of a continuum of constant transformation, yet these transformations are kept in line, so to speak, by a degree of stability. As Robert describes it:

I think if you experience identity in this way where your identity is sometimes incongruent with people's perceptions, what you experience and learn is that it's never 'either/or'. It's never just nurture or just nature, it is based on a relationship between so many things. It's the relationship between how you relate to your body and how society relates to your body. And those things constantly grind and shape one another, and what you are also dealing with

in the picture of that is time. Time makes us change as well, so it's this *constant, organic thing of changing*. (Personal Interview, my emphasis)

Both Munir and Charl also strongly identify with a narrative of being born in the wrong-sexed body. Munir maintains that "since childhood, I have always known, I have always felt that I should have been a boy instead of being a girl", while Charl contends that "when I came to my senses, when I could understand things, I just knew that I didn't want to play with girls, I didn't want to play with their toys, I wanted to play with boys and I wanted to play with their toys. So, when I realised that our sex organs are different, that's when I realised that there is a mistake, I shouldn't be having this, I should be having that" (Personal Interviews). The idea of having a masculine self that is trapped inside a feminine body is a recurring theme that arises in Charl's and Munir's interpretation of their lives, as well as their personal archives. Such a notion of being caught in a wrong-sexed body does not resonate with Robert's view on the relationship between his identity and his body. In Robert's opinion:

This is me, my body is me and that is one of the lessons ... you learn as a trans person – you are not removed from your body. Your body *is* you, so being trapped inside of it is already suggesting some kind of ethereal, spiritual idea, which is romantic enough I suppose, that your spirit is trapped in this shell that isn't worth much. I had to learn the worth of my body through this journey, so I never felt trapped in it. I have felt that my experience of myself is trapped in a system of society. The way I have experienced masculinity didn't always gel with the shell that is the system of gender around me. So it is a feeling of grinding inside of that system and of hurting, and also of adjusting to have better movement inside of the socialised system that is gender. That is another thing that I had to learn, I felt disconnected before and I think it's a basic human desire, even if we don't acknowledge it, to feel connected to society and to people around us and to be part of those wheels and cogs. Changing my body and the way I look gave me that privilege. (Personal Interview, participant's emphasis)

Divergence and similarity underscore these descriptions by the participants, presenting a complex interpretation of self that is both wrought and changed by social norms, but that, at times, is also treated as *being* more than just reducible to these norms. The participants also account for their psycho-somatic constitution as one in which their identities are both constrained by but also in excess of their corporeal make-up – ideas that may seem

irreconcilable at this stage of this research project, but that makes more sense later in this thesis once such ideas have been tested on the basis of the participants' personal archives. Despite a high degree of ambivalence that surfaces in these accounts, it is important to note that the research participants do see themselves as active agents who construct and visualise their specific identities. They are not the "dupes of gender", as Raymond might cast them to be, neither are they the radical "gender outlaws" that Bornstein calls for, but they perceive themselves to be playing an active role in narrating, constructing and visualising themselves in the *gender of their experience*. Their understanding of gender is necessarily based on a binary model, and they are acutely aware of this as they present themselves as the product of such a model. They do not aspire to somehow 'escape' gender, but they embody, visualise and narrate it in such a way that it is/becomes intelligible. They demonstrate a profound awareness of the gendered frames that render them recognisable, as well as of the threat of precariousness that pervades a non-intelligible presentation of self – in this context this would be an unclear or non-convincing presentation of a particular gender.

As this research demonstrates, Butler's ideas surrounding precarity and the reiterative nature of performativity can be valuable when investigating how frames of gender impact on the three research participants and their conception of self – such ideas provide a mode of analysis that is sensitive to the complicated workings of gender, while they also leave scope for dealing with the discourses (be they social or political) that render certain subjects vulnerable to normative frameworks. However, an application of Butler's model of performativity can easily allow for any investigation to become mired in the complicated questions around agency – questions, which Butler admits, often lead to essentialist binaries. Making use of Butler without being aware of the ambivalence that underscores her conception of agency, as well as of the intersectional nature of subjectivity that she highlights, would run the danger of forcing complex, multifaceted issues to be stripped of their intricate dimensions at the cost of producing a singular answer, a fragment of evidence. Firstly, such an explanation can assume that the degree of agency that is 'really' enacted by a certain individual or group is actually measurable – that some authority can stand in a position 'outside' the very codes that are under investigation and arrive at an empirically induced conclusion about the supposed lack or possession of agency. Within such a model, a teleological account of agency is emphasised as it is placed on a scale that can suggest an unambiguous, coherent and singular outcome as the epitome of subjective experience. Secondly, such an argument for determining and finalising 'the subject' as agent can undermine its position of being constituted at the intersection of various codes of

being that are not necessarily linguistic – social and biological codes that make it difficult (and unfeasible) to try and pinpoint and frame any subject as finished and completely comprehensible. Such a view can present a coagulated image of a particular subject that undermines the various discourses and real-life complexities that render life a fragmentary and fluctuating occurrence.

#### **2.2.3.4 In Transition: Gender Performativity and South African Masculinities**

In order to account for the complexity of the gendered subjectivities that are investigated in this thesis, the concept of ‘masculinity’ as it relates to a Butlerian model of gender needs to be addressed. The idea of the ‘masculine self’ is of particular significance within the context of this study, specifically if it is drawn upon to highlight “the multiple discursivity that posits individuality on the subject, while also acknowledging the performative character of this constitution” (Whitehead 2002: 208). This section provides a brief outline of key discourses that specifically address masculinity in its diverse social configurations. This framework is of particular importance as provides a schema for approaching the experience and visualisation of masculinity by the three trans men who participated in this study. In addition, such an overview is useful for identifying gaps that might exist in contemporary accounts of masculinity that still assume (be it explicitly or implicitly) that masculinity is the domain of the biological male. This discussion also provides a platform for the investigation of the photographic archives of the three participants in Chapter 4 – archives in which particular ideas of a masculine self are negotiated and presented.

One of the ideas that is repeatedly emphasised in contemporary literature on masculinity is an awareness of it being a multiple, culturally embedded construct. In his much-cited study of masculinity, R.W. Connell argues against any essentialist interpretation of the subject that would aim to define “what-men-empirically-are” (1995: 69), and he rather proffers a perspective on masculinity as a site where various (changing, contending) factors are always at play. For Connell, “masculinity is not a coherent object about which a generalising science can be produced ... [but] in speaking of masculinity ... we are ‘doing gender’ in a culturally specific way” (1995: 67). This perspective is also aligned with that of various other authors whose work demonstrates a trend of challenging an essentialised, monolithic view of masculinity by acknowledging the multiplicity of male/masculine identities – see, for example, the work of Paul Baker (2003), Nigel Edley (2001), Matthew Gutmann (1997), Michael Kimmel (2000), Sean Nixon (1996, 2003), Lyn Segal (1993), Paul Smith (1996), Margaret Wetherell and Nigel Edley (1996, 2008), and Stephen

Whitehead (2002), to name but a few, in which masculinity is underlined as an historically specific, plural phenomenon.<sup>56</sup>

Related to such an understanding of masculinity is the notion of its embeddedness within and manifested through complex social relations. For Connell (1995), a refiguring of masculinity as a social practice is necessitated by an acknowledgement of its contingency – both in terms of it being a category that is bound to change and contradiction, as well it existing as a point of connection within various discursive and corporeal relationships. Accordingly, Connell argues that:

Rather than attempting to define masculinity as an object (a natural character type, a behavioural average, a norm), we need to focus on the processes and relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives. 'Masculinity', to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practice through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture (1995: 71).

This perspective has been taken up and renegotiated by various other authors. For Nixon (2003), masculinity as concept is based on social variables, all of which contribute to an understanding of its relational nature – of its power and meaning being embedded within wider social networks. Multiple lines of power are at play when conceptualising of masculinity, and Nixon stresses the importance of a “plural model of power relations”, which would have as its foundation a way of “thinking relationally of masculinity – both in terms of the relations between masculinities and in terms of the relations between masculinity and femininity” (2003: 297, 300). Whitehead concurs with such a perspective by arguing that “masculinities are plural and multiple; they differ over space, time and context, are rooted only in the cultural and social moment, and are, thus, inevitably entwined with other powerful and influential variables such as sexuality, class, race and ethnicity” (2002: 34).<sup>57</sup> These viewpoints place strong emphasis on masculinity as a concept and practice that is based on the intersection of, and relationship between, various

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<sup>56</sup> As Whitehead testifies in his comprehensive study of masculinity, his own investigation forms part of a growing (and widely published) international study of the “sociology of masculinity”, which also forms part of (and responds to) the postmodern era “in which the inherent instability of the self, the multiplicity and fluidity of identities, and the dissipation of boundaries between people and cultures are so evident” (2002: 2, 167).

<sup>57</sup> See also David Gutterman (2001), Bob Pease and Keith Pringle (2001), Segal (1993), Caroline Sweetman (1997), and Wetherell and Edley (1996) on the contingency of masculinity in terms of class, race, ethnicity and sexuality.

factors. Not only do such intersections complicate a clear-cut understanding of masculinity, but the provisional nature of any definition of this category also needs to be taken into account. As Connell contends “any one masculinity, as a configuration of practice, is simultaneously positioned in a number of structures of relationship, which may be following different historical trajectories. Accordingly masculinity, like femininity, is always liable to internal contradiction and historical disruption” (1995: 73).

Despite the multiplicity that underscores the concept and manifestation of masculinity, certain masculinities enjoy more privilege by being tied to discourses of power and normative authorisation. Masculinity is a concept of power, Connell insists, yet it does not imply that all men share in this power equally (1987, 1995). For all the divergence that might underlie masculinities, some forms of masculinity are exalted above others, and Connell accounts for such hierarchy in his highly influential account of “hegemonic masculinity” (1995). This term underscores a process of domination through which certain manifestations of masculinity benefit from normative approval. Despite the tremendous power that such a masculinity might exert, Connell deems it crucial to emphasise that “‘hegemonic masculinity’ is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable” (1995: 76).<sup>58</sup>

Whitehead (2002) extends and renegotiates such a definition of hegemonic masculinity by drawing on a Foucauldian definition of power – while Connell’s definition seems to be more concerned with patriarchal social order, Whitehead aims to demonstrate how masculinity’s power functions in a circulatory rather than an hierarchical manner (2000: 92-96). Instead of seeing gender relations as a power struggle between opposing forces, Whitehead proffers what he describes as a Foucauldian take on masculinity as a “power process” that is fraught with various ambiguities and contingencies. Whitehead maintains that such an analysis “signals that (gender) power and oppression can exist across a multitude of social environs, not all of them describable as masculinist or the province of the male” (2000: 108). Power is treated as something that is “exercised rather than held ... immanent to both the social condition and the production of individual subjectivity”, which leads

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<sup>58</sup> See also Wetherell and Edley (1996) on the concept of ‘power’ being central to the manifestation of masculinity; Davina Cooper (1994) and George Mosse (1996) on normative masculinity as a social function; Michael Kaufman (1994) on masculine power as an ambivalent experience; and Peter Middleton’s on “heroic masculinity” as a metanarrative of power (1992: 2-3).



Whitehead to the conclusion that the gendered subject is “both *subjected to masculinity* and *endorsed as an individual by masculinity*” (2002: 111, emphasis in original).<sup>59</sup>

Whitehead’s understanding of masculinities as bound to processes of power has important repercussions when thinking about the representation and enactment of masculinities within particular socio-political settings. It is perhaps in this regard that his analysis of masculinity is at its most discerning as he demonstrates that the discursive manifestation of masculinity, however contradictory, diverse or ambivalent it may be, has specific (power) effects. Whitehead is of the opinion that “no amount of cultural representation can make masculinities biologically real ... however, what is clear is that there is a material actuality to masculinities” (2002: 34-35). Masculinities may be illusionary, Whitehead argues, but the practice of masculinity has real consequences. As Whitehead succinctly puts it, “masculinity is *both illusion and reality*” (2002: 42, emphasis in original). Within such a framework, masculinity becomes a site, albeit an ambivalent and conflicted one, through which the “ontological security” (Whitehead 2002: 189) of a given human subject is invested in and imagined through a bodily presence.

This idea has particular relevance to my own study of the visualisation of trans masculinities insofar as the research participants treat these masculinities as sites of security. Whitehead uses the term ‘masculine ontology’ to refer to the “pursuit of being and becoming masculine by the human subject” (2002: 210). Such a perspective is important as it acknowledges that, despite the multiplicity and instability of gender identities, a human subject’s desire for (and sense of) a ‘whole’ and ‘grounded’ gender identity may be extremely strong (2000: 211). A search for ontological security in gender categories does not necessarily suggest that a masculine subject is ‘innately’ male but, Whitehead argues, that the experience of ‘being a man’ is based on a process of *becoming* by being positioned “in discourses that speak of and suggest maleness/masculinity” (2000: 212). This conception provides an important backdrop for my own study, as the personal archives that are created by the research participants show how image and narrative are used to give recognition to the process and products of *actualising* a gender identity, and of *becoming* a man – an idea that I return to in Chapter 4.

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<sup>59</sup> Whitehead suggests the term ‘masculanism’ to illustrate this position, and to indicate his departure from Connell’s ‘hegemonic masculinity’. For Whitehead, the term ‘masculinism’ does not imply a conception of masculinity as “ontologically distinct and grounded in the individual”, but it rather underscores a view of masculinity as something that always operates within a “social web” in which power and resistance are exercised simultaneously (2002: 107).

In considering such an understanding of masculinity within the South African context, its multiple, relational and aspirational character is compounded by various socio-political attributes that intersect at the point of its discursive and material actualisation. Of profound importance when investigating local conceptions of masculinity is an understanding of the various histories that have indelibly shaped its current configuration, with the discourses of colonialism and nationalism being particularly powerful.<sup>60</sup> The transition from an apartheid to a post-apartheid state and its influence on contemporary masculinities are areas that have increasingly enjoyed attention in local writings on the subject. Robert Morrell (1998, 2001) is one of the most prominent authors to investigate the complex manifestation of masculinity in South Africa. For Morrell, race and class are of major importance in the way that masculinity is practiced in South Africa as colonialism, capitalism and nationalism have played a large role in its manifestation. Morrell summarises this position by arguing that:

South Africa, until recently, was a man's country. Power was exercised publicly and politically by men. In families, both black and white, men made decisions, earned the money, and held power. The law (both customary and modern) supported the presumption of male power and authority and discriminated against women. But the country's history also produced brittle masculinities – defensive and prone to violence (2001: 18).

At the same time, Morrell also points out that the change from an apartheid to a post-apartheid state should not be conceived of as a dialectic progression through which all masculinities were radically reconfigured. As Morrell argues “masculinity is not inherited nor is it acquired in a one-off way” (2001: 9), and post-apartheid South Africa is still caught up in the contradictions of its own violent past, as well as in the (racial, gendered) legacies inherited from the previous apartheid state. As Morrell's study demonstrates, the South African gendered landscape is complex and volatile.

Various other authors have drawn attention to such a conception of changing (and competing) South African masculinities. For Liz Walker, post-apartheid South Africa represents a “disturbance” and a “destabilisation” of essential models of masculinity, particularly those models that dominated during the colonial and apartheid era's (2005: 161). The influence of the post-apartheid South African Constitution is strongly emphasised

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<sup>60</sup> See John and Jean Comaroff (1992), Catherine Hall (1992) and Mrinalini Sinha (1995) on the effect of colonialist and imperialist discourses on global conceptions of masculinity, and Robert Morrell (1998) on the impact of these discourses within the South African arena.

by Walker for its effect on a 'crisis of masculinity' that runs through local society, and that is (in part) a response to international discourses on masculinity as a site of predicament (2005: 162-166). As Walker argues:

South Africa's contemporary crisis of masculinity and male sexuality has been brought into sharp focus by the transition to democracy (especially gender transformation), the adoption of the Constitution and the public discourses of human rights culture. Being a man in post-apartheid South Africa is of necessity different, yet the present does not represent a complete rupture with the past ... [and] the 'crisis of masculinity' in contemporary South Africa may therefore be different, but it is certainly not new (2005: 163).<sup>61</sup>

A plethora of texts supplement such an interrogation of the complexity of post-apartheid masculinities. The work of Catherine Burns (1998), Ira Horowitz (2001), Lisa Lindsay and Stephan Miescher (2003), Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morrell (2005), Lisa Richter and Robert Morrell (2006), Lincoln Theo (2007), Elaine Salo (2007), Tamara Shefer *et al.* (2007) and Stella Viljoen (2008) are all invested in accounting for some of the multiplicity that characterises South African and sub-Saharan masculinities. In addition, white masculinities are specifically investigated and the work of Katie Mooney (1998) and Liese van der Watt (2005), while Bantobetse Mokgatlhe and Johannes Schoeman (1998), Nkhensani Mtebule (2001), Kopano Ratele (1998, 2001), Garth Stevens and Rafiq Lockhat (1997), and Tokozani Xaba (2001) address issues around the transformation and experience of masculinity amongst black South Africans after the fall of apartheid.

Despite the divergence of these accounts of South African masculinities, a critical lack of recognition pervades the investigation of the experience of masculinity amongst trans people as most sources focus on masculinity as it is enacted by biologically male subjects. While some international studies accentuate the need for investigating 'alternative' masculinities,<sup>62</sup> local sources on the subject are scant. Of the few local sources available,

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<sup>61</sup> See Whitehead (2002: 47-63) for a critical interrogation of the concept of 'masculinity in crisis'. For Whitehead, the concept of modern masculinity being 'in crisis' has severely reductionist underpinnings as it often "speaks of masculinity in the singular; usually white, heterosexual and ethnocentric. Moreover, the masculinity posited is ahistorical and absolute, with men perceived as an homogenous group lacking class, ethnic, sexual or racial ramifications" (2002: 55). Whitehead rather wishes to emphasise that, even though such a 'crisis' may not be real in any absolute sense, "for some individual men anxieties concerning their sense of (masculine) identity may well be quite vivid" (2002: 58-59). Walker's discussion of masculinity in crisis responds to such an experience of anxiety as it traces both pre- and post-apartheid masculinities as sites of uncertainty that are not limited to white, heterosexual categories. Also see Sally Robinson (2000) and Michael Messner (1997) for further discussions of the notion of 'masculinity in crisis'.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, the work of Halberstam in which she investigates the way in which female masculinity has largely been ignored, both within Western culture, and within academic studies of masculinity (1998: 2).

the compilation of essays in *Trans* (Morgan et al. 2009) provides important narrative and photographic accounts that attest to the experience of being trans as plural, while Harper Keenan's study of South African trans masculinities provides a tentative, albeit urgent, call for further research on the subject (2007). Except for these texts, there is a noticeable lack of local research into forms of masculinity that can displace its essentialised reduction to the cisgender male. The need to address the multiplicity and social embeddedness of local masculinities resonates with this research project as it aims to give an account of how a 'masculine ontology' (to use Whitehead's term), a pursuit of being and becoming masculine, is negotiated by the trans men who participated in this study. These particular masculinities are investigated for the discursive and material actuality they carry within a South African context – neither being reducible to this context, nor escaping its historic legacy.

## 2.3 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter, and of this thesis as a whole, is not to situate trans men on a scale ranging from a perceived lack of agency to the complete realisation thereof; neither do I aim to somehow fuse the various accounts of self that were presented by my research participants into the 'best' definition of what constitutes a trans man. As Elliot (2010: 4) argues in this regard, to demand a comprehensive and final account of the process through which either a trans or a non-trans person negotiate their sex/gender is unfair and futile, as this process is shaped by various complexities that often lie outside of a subject's control, or even consciousness. Descriptions of these processes are, however, valuable – not as a means to resolve issues surrounding identity, but to bring accounts of self to the fore that are prone to erasure and often marked by precarity and ambivalence. In line with such a project, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate the manifestation of discourses of power and notions of self through modes of reproduction – that is, how the subject is reiterated through the medium of photography within archival practices.

The following chapter draws on a conception of personal archives as reiterative spaces by investigating photography as a medium that is central to processes of reflecting, embodying and repeating certain modes of identification. Certain key themes that are

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Halberstam's work is committed to representing masculinity as multiple by drawing on European and American case studies from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to argue for the historical diversity of female masculinity. By moving masculinity beyond the male body and its effects, Halberstam demonstrates that female masculinity forms part of various expressions of identity, such as those presented by trans men. Other examples of international research into trans masculinities include the work of Prosser (1998), Dean Kotula (2002), Cromwell (1999) and Singer (2006), which are critically examined in Chapter 3.3 where I deal with textual and visual modes of trans autobiography.

identified in this chapter are expanded on in the next – for example, Foucault's notion of the archive as an intermediate location, as a space where archival discourses and knowledges of self are intertwined in a shared system of enunciability, provides a platform for my own investigation of the way in which archives are realised (that is, constituted and understood) through the medium of photography. Meanwhile, Derrida's concept of the archive as topo-nomological institution and practice allows for an enquiry into the spaces and discourses through which notions and memories of self are articulated. Simultaneously drawing on Derrida's conception of the archive and Butler's notion of gender performativity allows for an engagement with photography as a medium that makes manifest and aids the recollection of certain histories, memories and narratives. As an external substrate, photography allows for reiteration (a function that is central to both the Derridean archive and Butlerian subjectivity) as this medium allows for codes of subjectivity to be repeated. As a symbolic and mechanical apparatus, the photographic camera is reiterative in nature – it is used to frame and stabilise subjects 'as they are', thus constructing a fragile line of continuity that builds on previous images and occasions, while its technical ability to capture and recapture in a split second is central to its proliferation within modern society.

In much the same way that the archive and performativity function as structures of reference and modes of recollective subjectivity, photography provides a frame of reference that is simultaneously mnemonic and intricately tied to the notion of self. Photographs are reiterative frameworks made visible – they break with themselves every time they try to stabilise, and they fail in their actual function to *capture* as they can never completely solidify or contain the subjects that they represent. My interest in photography lies in its function as external prosthesis that leaves its symbolic residue on the subjects that it represents, and in the fact that it demonstrates that the archive can never be considered impartial, memory is never pure history, and performatives are always composite and social in their constitution.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **PHOTOGRAPHIC TRACES AND TALES OF SELF**

Often imagined as mirror-like surfaces that reflect reality and identity, photographs and archives are both closely aligned with how human subjects see and remember themselves. This chapter is interested in the representational, media-based dimension of memory that finds its expression in photographic archives. Photographs, as an ethics of seeing and a visual grammar (Sontag 2008: 3), are bound by their own topo-nomological constrictions, particularly when they are assembled to form a collection or archive of some sort. However, questions around photography's power to recollect truthfully have haunted this medium ever since its conception, and these questions have become particularly pronounced over the last few decades. Such questions also relate to my own investigation of the personal archives that were created by the research participants insofar as these collections are largely invested with (but, at times also dissociated from) an idea of truthful recollection.

In addition, this investigation is also concerned with photography as an autobiographical tool of self-representation, and it addresses the medium's complex relation to textual and/or verbal forms of self-narration. This is particularly relevant given the role that both photographic and textual narratives play in the accounts of self of the three trans men who participate in this study. Both images and words are used to represent ideas around a trans/male self, and such autobiographic narratives provide an intricate framework out of which the subjects emerge as authors of their own life stories. These narratives also have a profoundly social dimension insofar as they are complicit in debates around the public visibility of trans identities, particularly with regard to the manner in which such identities have been framed within autobiographical accounts. While the previous chapter argued for an understanding of gender identity as a possible site of precariousness, especially as it is lived and archived, this chapter demonstrates how photography fits within such an archival framework, be it in terms of its value as 'evidence', as a tool for bringing a (gendered) self into discourse, or as a means to make notions of self social and shareable. In conjunction, these two chapters form the theoretical basis of my study of the three personal archives that were created by Robert, Munir and Charl.

### 3.1 PHOTOGRAPHIC RECOLLECTION

*Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image* (Nora 1989: 13).

Functioning as a memorial to recollection, the archive signifies a supplement of some sort that aids our 'normal' existence by artificially fulfilling the function of a severed limb – in the case of the human subject the archive serves as an appendage that compensates for a fragile and lacking memory. Derrida's notion of the archive "as a prosthesis of the inside" (1995: 19) is especially powerful for its emphasis on modes of reiteration and recollection that underlie the human attachment to archival structures. The archive as a mnemonic extension of the human subject provides an important basis for investigating memory as it is discursively and visually (re)produced, as well as the transition from the private to the public that the archiving of memory seems to necessitate. This section is not really concerned with the ontology of memory, but rather with its production; that is to say how memory is externally reiterated and shared. This reiterative function of mnemonic recollection is investigated on the basis of photography – a medium that traces a complex relationship that has been forged between the human subject and the visualising practices it employs to thwart its own forgetfulness.

For such an investigation, I align my own analysis with Jens Brockmeier's view that memories are necessarily "interlaced with broader 'cultural texts' and situated within 'symbolic spaces', and that they are always incomplete in isolation. And because they are discursively negotiated (instead of just given or 'retrieved'), they appear as subject to orders of power and struggle" (2010: 13). Likewise, Kurt Danziger emphasises the need to be sensitive towards "mnemonic values" that underlie the methods and products of human recollection – these values are "culturally grounded assumptions about what is most worth remembering, what ought not to be or need not be remembered, how the shards of memory should fit together, [and] what kinds of tasks memory should be expected to serve" (2008: 20). The cultural and technological embeddedness of such mnemonic values is clearly detectable in photography – a medium that shares a special relationship with mnemonic recollection, particularly because of assumptions underlying its 'truthful' nature.

### 3.1.1 A Brief Introduction to External Mnemonics

The externalisation of memory is crucial as an act of remembrance, and it plays a significant part in the Western conception of the human being – be it as a social organism, and/or a subject in its own right. External memory, which is based “on the purposeful modification of a physical medium by means of specifically designed tools and skills” (Danziger 2008: 3) has played an integral role in the ability of a subject to conceive of and recollect his/her part in a complex system of conflicting and changing historical narratives.<sup>63</sup> In addition, human memory has been enmeshed in the notion of a coherent, bounded subject – of the human as a “container” or “possessor” of memory (Radstone & Hodgkin 2003: 3). Early modern conceptions of memory specifically emphasised the latter as a “refuge of the individual ... as a source from which identity issues” (West 2003: 62). For this reason, memory was seen as a kind of “storage space” (West 2003: 62; Danziger 2008: 25), or a container holding the intimate vestiges of the ‘self’,<sup>64</sup> and modes of externalised mnemonic recollection were important for verifying and solidifying the existence of the human subject.

For all the credence invested in memory as a storehouse of the self, ambivalence underlies such a conception, and this was particularly evident during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries where the notion of ‘sovereign subjectivity’ played a profound role in the Western imagination. While memory and its objects (the devices used to capture and store it) were frequently regarded as the seat of the self-possessed individual and his/her identity, as the place from which the self arises, the modernist notion of a pre-existent subject who actively interprets memory and its objects problematises the centrality of memory in the

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<sup>63</sup> Kurt Danziger (2008) provides a comprehensive account of the historical development of the externalisation of human memory in Western society by tracing the various cultural, social, philosophical and scientific discourses that have shaped its reception. His work is aligned with a general enquiry into the way in which societies remember (see, for example, Bluck *et al.* 2005; Connerton 1989; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Le Goff 1992; McNally 2003; Olson 1994; Roediger *et al.* 1996; Small 1997), be it through inscriptions (such as writing, drawing, or other visualising practices), objects (such as mementos) or social rites (such as ceremonies or shared reminiscences).

<sup>64</sup> Danziger’s (2008) study of discourses on memory shows how the storehouse metaphor has a long history within Western society, and that it can already be identified in the writings of Plato, who described memory as an aviary filled with birds, and St Augustine who described memory as a “huge cavern” and “vast palace” that is filled with personal treasures (cited in Danziger 2008: 25-26). This notion of memory as a container or building of sorts has repeatedly surfaced over the centuries – from John Locke’s empiricist account at the end of the seventeenth century that posits memory as a “storehouse of our ideas” (1959: 193), to William James’s suggestion that searching for a memory is similar to rummaging through a house (1890: 654). Tony Bennett also investigates the configuration of imperialist systems of memory in nineteenth-century ethnographic museums to create a perspective on the body as “a storage system in which all that has gone before is retained for retrieval in the present” (2003: 48). Even in the late twentieth century, the metaphor of memory as a storage space has been reinforced by references to memory as a computer from which data can be retrieved (Danziger 2008: 25; Leslie 2003: 182).



conceptualisation of identity.<sup>65</sup> The post-Cartesian mind-set that left its indelible mark on the modernist episteme upheld rationality and empiricism as the more reliable, impartial and universal alternatives to memory, which was seen as personal, distorted and fragmented (Danziger 2008; Reiss 1996). Interestingly, the rise of empiricism simultaneously led to the demise of the notion of memory as a truthful copy of reality, while it also gave rise to a profound belief in certain objects of memory, such as photography, for conveying the 'truth'. At the same time, the archive was established in modernist discourse as one of the central metaphors and institutions that can be drawn upon to recollect memory. The idea of a storehouse of memory therefore changed its shape, and it became a profoundly public, reproducible and visual object that could be collected and ordered in a seemingly rational and scientific (as opposed to personal and self-reflexive) way.

The ambivalence that underscores the relationship between memory and the human subject is perhaps nowhere more pronounced than in those processes where memory is seemingly given an external dimension, that is, where memories are somehow manifested in a substrate that exists 'outside' the human subject. Notions of memory transition, of memories made prosthetic, are intricately bound to the expansion of memory from the realm of the individual and the private to the domains of the social, the public and even the intersubjective.<sup>66</sup> The relationship between the self and the social pivots on a contradiction that posits memory as a private, affective trace and a trace that becomes readable, visible and interpretable via its transference to the public domain (Radstone & Hodgkin 2003: 5; see also Radstone 2000; Terdiman 1993). By making memory public, it assumes a representational, media-based dimension that, in turn, lends itself to archival modes of recollection (Frow 1997: 222; see also Bennett 2003).

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<sup>65</sup> René Descartes is exemplary of this school of thought as he emphasises memory as a profoundly unreliable system for accessing knowledge. For Descartes, scientific methodologies are more reliable than memories; in fact, Descartes believes that "we must not allow a needless effort of memory to distract a part of our mind from knowledge on the object before it" (1985: 69).

<sup>66</sup> This perspective places particular emphasis on memory as a material social practice, as something that is produced through intersubjective relations, in contrast to a more traditional viewpoint of memory as individual and private (Radstone & Hodgkin 2003: 91). Constantina Papoulias (2003) draws on such a perspective by emphasising memory as a sedimentation of various social knowledges. Her analysis of memory as a social disposition is also largely informed by Clifford Geertz's relocation of human thought from the individual to the public realm – to the "market place" of memory (1973: 45). The notion of memory as a layered cultural system of recollection has also been investigated by James Fentress and Chris Wickham (1992), Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam (1996), Maurice Halbwachs (1992), Nadia Seremetakis (1994) and John Shotter (1990). This is a point to which I return in Chapter 3.2.2, when I investigate the role of photography as a social platform for mnemonic exchange.

The supplement of some form of language or representational system is central to the transformation of private experiences into public knowledge – for this reason certain “memory props” (Feuchtwang 2003: 76) or forms of “artificial memory” (West 2003: 62) have often been drawn upon to work against the fragility of personal memory, and to grant these memories a social dimension. The public life of memories has a profoundly visual dimension, and it is within the realm of images that memory enjoys a high degree of social currency (Jenks 1995; Mitchell 2005). In Western society sight has historically been privileged for providing access to the external world, which, in turn, had a great influence on the function of visually-based media for aiding recollection (Jenks 1995: 1-2).<sup>67</sup> Images play an integral role in summoning and transferring human memories, to such a degree that it can even be argued that they “form a social collective that has a parallel existence to the social life of their human hosts” (Mitchell 2005: 93). As “mediated memories”, images are a “formative part of our autobiographical and cultural identities” (Van Dijk 2005: 262), and they provide visual adhesive for uniting the realms of the social, the individual and the mnemonic.

While images have a propensity towards rendering vestiges of the past memorable and exchangeable, it is the photograph that stands out as mnemonic prosthesis. On both a physical and metaphorical level (Danziger 2008; Draaisma 2000; Haverty Rugg 1997) photography has long been invested with the notion of ‘faithful’ recollection.<sup>68</sup> Even though such a charge of ‘truthfulness’ has largely been contested in contemporary writings on the subject (as I demonstrate in the next section), photography’s investment in mnemonic recollection has been central to its incorporation into archival sciences.<sup>69</sup> Positivist

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<sup>67</sup> According to Chris Jenks (1995: 2-3), the project of modernity was inclined towards modes of visual communication, and “the modern world is very much a ‘seen’ phenomenon”. Empiricism is also “profoundly committed to the sensory basis of all knowledge” (Danziger 2008: 102; see also Goodman 1978; Foster 1988; Jay 1988, 1989; Mitchell 2005). Hence, technologies of visual representation, especially photography, are central to modernist regimes of memory in which the authentication of a Western history was of primary value (Leslie 2003: 168-169).

<sup>68</sup> A popular idea runs through some (especially earlier) writings on photography that emphasise its power to communicate, recollect and sustain the human subject – be it in notions of photography as a science to preserve time (Fischer 1845: vi) and a means of “fixing” its transitory nature (Lake Price 1868: 4), or even of its disposition as a “universal language” (Gernsheim 1962: 229), an “honest medium” (Weston 1930: 317) or a “brutal fact” (Salzmann cited in Braive 1966: 212). Photographs were also conceptualised as “windows” to reality through which the “real world” was transformed into a two-dimensional copy (Sayre 1989: 37), or as vehicles for providing the necessary mnemonic back-up and stability for the human subject and its fragile memories (Haverty Rugg 1997; see also Mitchell 1986). Of course, these sentiments form but a part of the complex history of photography, which has, from the medium’s advent, also witnessed a strong distrust of the notion of photographic ‘truthfulness’.

<sup>69</sup> This idea also has bearing on its use in the construction of the personal archives of the three research participants. Yet, even though some photographs might play an important role within these archives for verifying some idea of self, this does not imply that photography as a whole is considered by all the participants to be a ‘truthful’ medium – in fact, their accounts of photography sometimes reveal a profound

motivations, which underlie the Western archive and its claims to objectivity and truth, are reflected in the use of photography as documentary evidence (Burton 2005: 7; Richards 1992). Moreover, empiricist aspirations drive the archival use of photographs to allow subjects to “speak through” a visual representation (Leslie 2003: 181). As Okwui Enwezor maintains, the archive provides a space (both physical and ideological) in which “the photograph becomes the sovereign analogue of identity, memory and history, joining past and present, virtual and real, thus giving the photographic document the aura of an anthropological artefact and the authority of a social medium” (2008: 13).

The functions of recording and preserving the past that underlie the archive as institution are mirrored in the development of photography as a vehicle for mnemonic recollection. The relationship between the archive and photography constitutes what Esther Leslie (2003: 178) identifies as a “technologisation of memory” – a bond that had a profound bearing on the institutionalisation of empiricism in mid-nineteenth century Europe. Various other authors share this idea that the development of the archive and photography are ideologically intertwined by a vocabulary of positivism and modernity. Joan Swartz (2000), for example, charts the technological and cultural progression of photography from a medium to see the world to its function as a means to *know* the world. This development, Schwartz argues, is inherently archival in its employment of photography for its purported veracity.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, Enwezor is of the opinion that the photograph’s endowment as a document of truthfulness is central to its function “as an archival record, as an analogue of a substantiated real or putative fact present in nature” (2008: 11). Photography, Enwezor maintains, is therefore a critical instrument of archival modernity.

For Allan Sekula (1993: 343), photography may promise an “enchanted mastery” over nature and the human subjects that it captures, but it is more than just a harbinger of modernity – rather, “photography is modernity run riot”. By tracing the development of photography as an “exemplary utilitarian social machine” (1993: 346), Sekula stresses the disciplinary function of the medium as its power to create delineations around centre and periphery, around the included and the excluded, has long served the hegemonic regimes of the Western archive. At the foundation of the archival deployment of photographs lies

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distrust of its ability to capture the ‘real’. These conceptions are unpacked in much more depth in Chapter 4 on the basis of specific examples.

<sup>70</sup> As its scientific credentials became more established in the nineteenth century, photography became a prime instrument for observation. Schwartz (2000: 6) relates the development of this idea to the role that the daguerreotype, as an early form of photography, played in the nineteenth century, when it was likened to the telescope and the microscope. This, Schwartz argues, reveals the scopophilic attributes of the sciences, hence their interest in photography.

a preoccupation with the mapping of the social terrain of the time, and photography thus came to be configured as an apparatus for transforming, ordering and manipulating the subjects that it captures. The potential for identifying a subject and casting him/her within an archival category was central to the photograph's power of producing a social calculus of discipline, a visual standard of sorts, against which extremities and abnormalities could be judged (Sekula 1993: 346; see also Krauss 1982; Sekula 1983). While photography provided the object and the means of rationalisation, the archive presented the paradigm from which an abstract visual language could be constructed around the diverse images that were collected.<sup>71</sup> At the same time photography as a modernist archival practice accentuated the notion of photographic portraiture as capturing or reflecting the 'self' or 'essence' of the human subject, that is, it served as a means of affirming Cartesian subjectivity.

Positivist assumptions of the photographic archive as a site of knowable reality have been extensively questioned by critics within the archival profession who are aligned (to varying degrees) to a postmodern enquiry into the archive's fact-based, truth-orientated nature.<sup>72</sup> This departure is also reflected in academic enquiries into the cultural, scientific and political discourses that have cemented the evidentiary imagining of photography within Western society. The next section of this chapter is concerned with some of the most important changes that characterise the popular and academic conceptualisation of photography from the 1980s onwards, and that have a bearing on some of the discourses that shape its contemporary reading.

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<sup>71</sup> The diversity and "messy contingency" of photographs, argues Sekula (1993), frustrates the archival promise of order. Photographs need to be "tamed" by means of categorisation, selection and discursive framing – what is needed is an archival "transformation of the circumstantial and idiosyncratic into the typical and emblematic" (1993: 352). Enwezor (2008: 16) also highlights this idea by arguing that the archive compensates for the "unwieldy, diachronic state of photography" by providing systems of order and selection to a medium that is characterised by multiplicity and dispersion. The evidentiary force of photography thus seems to be partially indebted to archival taxonomies that lend qualities of stability and authority to the medium. See also Terry Cook (1997), Jonathan Crary (1992), Hal Foster (2004), Ursula Franklin (1999), Helmut Gernsheim (1982) and Joan Schwartz (1995) for writings on the convergence of archival sciences, photographic practices and empiricism within modernist discourse.

<sup>72</sup> According to Schwartz (2000), the twentieth century is defined by a movement against the notion of the photograph as truthful record of reality, which, in turn, reflects a general questioning of the archive as a basis for public memory. This development, Schwartz contends (2000: 37-38), corresponds to a postmodern shift in the theorisation of the archive, and lends itself to an interrogation of assumptions regarding the innocence, authenticity, impartiality or unmediated nature of photographic/archival recollection. See also Richard Cox (1993) Barbara Craig (2002), Candace Loewen (1991) and Preben Mortensen (1999) for further interrogation of positivist paradigms that pervade the discipline of archival studies.

### 3.1.2 Photographic Evidence: Key Debates and Departures

The supposed bridge that photography provides between memory and reality, between the subject and the external world, has dominated much writing on the photographic medium. Roland Barthes's assertion of the referential power of photography in *Camera Lucida* (1981) has arguably been most influential in reinforcing the idea that photographs provide access (albeit in a very mediated form) to reality.<sup>73</sup> Barthes's treatment of the photograph as a mechanical repetition of reality, as a "weightless, transparent envelope" (1981: 5), places emphasis on its referential or indexical value. For Barthes, the photograph provides certain (though not unproblematic) evidence that something has existed – it is "a superimposition of here: of reality and of the past" that provides the viewer with access to history (1981: 76). At the same time, it is also an "emanation of the referent" that testifies to a person that has been captured "in flesh and blood" by the camera (1981: 80). While the photograph bears visual testimony to the existence of the photographed subject, it also allows for a degree of intimacy to be facilitated by this medium.

It is important to take into account this understanding of photographs as vehicles for documentation and intimacy, given the context within which Barthes is presenting his argument. Much of the emphasis that Barthes places on the photograph's power to resurrect is centred on his discussion of the famous and much cited Winter Garden photograph (that is the image of his recently deceased mother which shows her as a young woman) in which Barthes tries to glean the meaning of her existence from the surface of an image that is never shown to the readers of *Camera Lucida*.<sup>74</sup> For Barthes, this photograph, and the medium of photography in general, facilitates and bears testimony to human

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<sup>73</sup> According to James Elkins (2007), the centrality of Barthes's writings, especially of *Camera Lucida*, in discourses on photography and its function as document of reality is exemplified by the sheer abundance of work that quotes or proceeds from Barthes's work. In fact, most of the essays that Elkins compiled in *Photography Theory* (2007) make reference to Barthes, and a whole chapter is devoted to the issue of Barthes's formulation of photographic indexicality. Barthes underscores the photograph's indexical relationship to reality, and various writers have picked up on his adoption of Pierce's semiotic model in which the photograph is also iconic and symbolic in its value as a sign (see, for example, Baetens *et al.* 2007: 129-168; Frizot 2007: 270; Hirsch 1997: 6; Krauss 1982: 213). Barthes's (over-)emphasis on photographic indexicality can perhaps be read as a sign of a general human investment in photographs for furnishing evidence. Such a measure of indexicality is simultaneously emphasised and negated in the case of the research participants of this study – an idea that I investigate in Chapter 4.

<sup>74</sup> Barthes's treatment of this particular photograph as a narrative piece – or what Marianne Hirsch describes as a "prose picture" (1997: 7), Margaret Olin as a device for "disguising absence" (2002: 112) and William Mitchell as an "imagetext" (1994: 192) – is important for my own analysis of the research participants' archives, particularly as some of the photographs that are included in this study are never revealed to the reader, but only described. I therefore return to this example in Chapter 4, when I deal with the specific examples of the intimate relationship between narratives and censored photographs of self.

relationships – it is “a sort of umbilical cord [that] links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed” (1981: 81). Accordingly, no other medium can be granted the certainty that photography enjoys in verifying (human) existence,<sup>75</sup> and Barthes upholds this visualising practice as the ultimate “certificate of presence” (1981: 87).

Despite the photograph’s overwhelming power of authentication, Barthes does not necessarily regard its role as an index of reality as uncomplicated or resolved. This is exemplified by Barthes’s formulation of photography as a “perverse confusion” of the concepts of the ‘real’ and the ‘live’ (Barthes 1981: 79) – a photograph may attest to something that has existed, but it can never vouch that something still exists. For all the evidentiary value that might be invested in photography, it remains an extremely misleading, imprecise, impenetrable and therefore a profoundly painful medium (1981: 79, 100, 107) as one cannot completely access that which is depicted. *Camera Lucida* ends with a rather dejected Barthes admitting that he is confronted with the limitations of the photographic medium: “I must therefore submit to this law: I cannot penetrate, cannot reach into the Photograph. I can only sweep it with my glance, like a smooth surface” (1981: 106). The photograph therefore remains a facade that can never facilitate total recollection, that is, total access to what is depicted. Hinged on this idea is photography’s relation to memory, which is severely distorted by the “excessive, monstrous” immobilisation of time within photographs. A photograph “fills the sight by force” (1981: 91) as it fixes a certain reality upon its surface that can contradict and constrain human recollections of a certain event or person. Once again, the praise that Barthes initially seems to bestow on the medium of photography as evidentiary force is replaced by awareness of its double-edged nature – of the violence that underlies its capturing mechanisms (1981: 91). The photograph simultaneously secures and petrifies memory, and its basic premise of inclusion (of placing in a frame) also underscores processes of exclusion. Photography becomes destructive as it is “never, in essence, a memory ... but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes counter-memory” (1981: 91). For Barthes, the only proper way to archive a photograph is to consign it to the drawer or the wastebasket (1981: 93), that is, keep it out of sight or to transform it into refuse.

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<sup>75</sup> In fact, Barthes argues that language is rendered impotent when compared to the power of photographs as vehicles for authentication as “language is, by nature, fictional; the attempt to render language unfictional requires an enormous apparatus of measurements: we invoke logic, or, lacking that, sworn oath; but the Photograph is indifferent to all intermediaries: it does not invent; it is authentication itself” (1981: 87). Ironically, or perhaps as a twist in his own logic, Barthes only uses language when referring to the image of his mother, and the referential power of this photograph can only be assumed by the reader, and not judged (as Barthes would rather have it) by a viewer. Text, which Barthes considers to be “parasitic” and suppressive of the multiplicity of photographic meaning (1964: 25, 39), becomes the only way to gain (partial, mediated) access to this particular photograph.

Various other writers have touched upon the popular and political treatment of photography as evidentiary medium. Alan Sekula (1984) interrogates the evidentiary power of photography by drawing attention to its power as a legal document that somehow assumes 'neutrality' and 'truth'. According to Sekula, the photograph forms part of a complex social discourse in which its functions are both honorific and repressive. The photograph is contingent upon certain historical contexts, Sekula maintains, and its value as a document of 'truth' reflects the need for 'scientific' and 'objective' evidence that pervades modernist discourse in Western society. For all the legitimacy that is invested in this medium, photographs are persistently haunted by their failure to completely master and 'know' the individuals that they capture and, as Sekula demonstrates, their status as evidence has never been completely secure. This sentiment is also shared by John Tagg (1988), who emphasises the photographic process as severely distorted as a result of its entrenchment in socio-political discourses – by departing from what he identifies as Barthes's assumption that "every photograph is somehow co-natural with its referent", Tagg maintains that "every photograph is a result of specific and, in every sense, significant distortions which render its relation to any prior reality deeply problematic" (1988: 1-2).<sup>76</sup> While photographs reaffirm certain aspects of identity, other features are suppressed, and these accounts reveal the medium of photography to be invested with a profoundly subjective desire for objective recollection – a contradiction that defines the human relationship with photographic images as mnemonic devices.

Susan Sontag (2008) shares Sekula's definition of photography as a social discourse by arguing that photographs endow human subjects with a visual code that frames their perception of the world. According to Sontag, photographs represent a visual "grammar" and "an ethics of seeing"<sup>77</sup> that endow human subjects with a sense that they "can hold the

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<sup>76</sup> Tagg's reading of Barthes ignores certain key arguments in the latter's earlier work (1961, 1964), where photography is specifically discussed as constitutive of norms of power, as based on specific historical contingencies, and as a medium that has the power to distort and naturalise meaning. While Barthes places much more emphasis on the referential power of photography in *Camera Lucida*, even in this text the indexical value of the photograph is revealed as ambivalent and convoluted. See also Joel Snyder (1980: 500) for a discussion of photography as a constructed mode of seeing, Victor Burgin (1982: 146) on photographic viewing practices as entrenched in ideologies of power, Walter Benjamin (2008) on issues of control and surveillance that pervade the state's employment of photography, and Jan Baetens *et al.* (2007) for a more recent debate on the topic of photography as a natural(ising) medium.

<sup>77</sup> This idea is also echoed in Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) analysis of photography in which he argues that "inasmuch as the practice is only photography of the photographable, it is associated with those places and moments which, in both senses of the word, define it" (1990: 39). Photography's function of world-making is stressed by Bourdieu as subject to social rules, and he emphasises the role of class in the photographic expression of social memory. As an "object of regulated exchange", Bourdieu sees the photograph as a visual record that points toward the fulfilment of socially defined functions (1990: 20). Victor Burgin (1982: 146) also suggests that photography presents a "structure of representation – point-of-view and frame – [that] is ultimately implicated in the reproduction of ideology (the 'frame-of-mind' of our 'points-of-view')". See also David Company (2007: 310), Sarah Kember (1997: 96-99) and Anne McCauley (2007: 420).



whole world” in their heads (2008: 3) – they can therefore be seen as ways of collecting, mediating and archiving human perceptions. To photograph is to appropriate the person or object photographed, maintains Sontag, as “it means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power” (2008: 4). But instead of objectively capturing the world, photography is seen by Sontag as a device that fiddles with the truth – it may provide evidence, but a distorted version of it (2008: 4-5). Sontag therefore troubles the easy assumption that photographs are miniatures of reality by drawing attention to processes of “selective transparency” that underlie their authority and seductiveness.

Sontag’s description of photographs hints at an archival understanding of their implementation as evidentiary documents – as symbolic objects and pieces of information that can be used for “cataloguing ... the world” (2008: 22). Sontag’s assertion that photography “reinforces a nominalist view of social reality as consisting of small units” (ibid.) also lends itself to processes of archiving, where the idea of collecting slices of time and fragments of history has tremendous relevance. Despite the purported ability of photographs to provide the human subject with an inventory, Sontag maintains that “their value as information is of the same order as fiction” (ibid.) as the photograph hides as much as it discloses, and it only provides the viewer with a surface, and not with untampered reality.<sup>78</sup> Photographs are *semblances* of knowledge, control and of history miniaturised as they “turn the past into a consumable object” (2008: 68).<sup>79</sup> As their popular rhetoric also underscores a function of disclosure inasmuch as they seem to ‘capture’ the human subject’s distinct character or “thereness” (2008: 77), the mnemonic imprints that they leave behind are mediated fragments of histories and subjectivities. Following Sontag’s line of reasoning, it seems as if photographs are not only framed in

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<sup>78</sup> This idea resonates with Barthes’s own confrontation with the photograph as impenetrable surface (1981: 106). Sontag also shares with Barthes an understanding of photographic reality as intensely complicated – for Barthes, the photograph is a “bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination” that is “false on the level of perception...[and] chafed by reality” (1981: 115), while Sontag is of the opinion that “photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy” (2008: 23). Both authors also draw attention to the violence and aggression that pervade the medium (Barthes 1981: 91; Sontag 2008: 7, 14, 24); to photography as a compulsive, fetishist practice (Barthes 1981: 30; Sontag 2008: 24); and to photography as a medium that lends itself to self-reflection and, in some cases, even to sentimentality (Barthes 1981: 21; Sontag 2008: 15, 24).

<sup>79</sup> Sontag is often quoted for asserting that “all photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt” (2008: 15). The power of photographs to preserve and commemorate is also emphasised in its function as an *aide-mémoire*, as a device that can be used to capture memory (Schwartz 2000: 17). Joseph Ellis (1847: 41) writes, for example, about the photograph’s power to “preserve from the decay of time, and the fickle tenure of mortality, the true type of the features of those we love”. Likewise, André Bazin locates photography’s popular appeal in its capacity to embalm certain events – like dead insects preserved in amber, photography purportedly safeguards fragments of life from the passage of time (1967: 242).



popular culture as identical to human experiences, but that human experiences are often accessed retrospectively through the medium of photography.

Sontag's interest in photography as a medium that supports and provides structure to the human subject is also picked up by Judith Butler (2009a) who approaches Sontag's work in order to determine the impact of photography on frames or norms of recognition. Butler is drawn to Sontag's formulation of photography as a medium that has a context-specific ability to render (or create) forms of visual 'truth', and to situate a subject within such visual narratives. As maintained by Butler, Sontag's formulation of photography as a largely affective medium – as a visual instrument that moves or “haunts” (Sontag 2003b: 83) the viewer – is but a starting point for investigating the role of photographs for framing reality. Butler underscores the photograph's function as a reiterative device, as it provides and reproduces the structuring scene of interpretation – as Butler argues, “in framing reality, the photograph has already determined what will count within the frame” (2009a: 67). Butler's analysis is aligned with Sontag's own scepticism towards the ability of photographs to provide transparent access to 'reality', but Butler expands on Sontag's work by arguing that photography does not only provide a (highly dubious) means to interpret 'reality', but that it actually constructs a 'reality' within and by means of itself (2009a: 71). Our ability to access or even to understand 'reality' is strongly questioned by Butler, who argues that it cannot be conceived of without a frame (or normative structure), and that photography provides one such framework that is used to construct a reality (and not provide access to *the real* as such). As a visual framework, photography is thus central to determining what/who is visualised (or visualisable), and what/who is not, as the medium is tied to questions around recognisability. As Butler maintains, photography provides a way of framing a subject, or, conversely, of denying subjecthood.<sup>80</sup>

Photographs therefore have a significant bearing on the way in which both memory and subjectivity are retrieved, communicated, shared, and even conceived of within certain normative frameworks. As Butler maintains, photographs provide ways of seeing, as well as not seeing, and when approaching any photograph as 'evidence', it is of critical concern to be aware that such a line of enquiry is necessarily framed in a certain way. Butler's statement that gender is “a way of living the body with and for others” (2009b: xii) can perhaps be extended to incorporate photography into such an account of the human subject – photography is a way of seeing with and for others, and it provides possibilities

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<sup>80</sup> This is a very important idea as it relates to the way in which photographs can contest, or reproduce, a subject's status as precarious or unrecognisable. I return to the role of photographs as framing devices in Chapter 4 when I draw on specific images from the participants' archives.

of seeing as much as it provides delineations and constrictions. Photographs are framed and provide frameworks that allow us to see (and construct) a reality, but that also leave us blind to other realities.

Butler's use of Sontag's work as a point of departure also corresponds to a larger (academic and popular) interest in refiguring the photographic 'real'. A common thread that runs through the work of writers such as Barthes, Sontag and Sekula is the notion that a tenuous line links memory, photography and reality together. Considering that these writers were predominantly concerned with analogue photography (with film-based and chemically produced images), their uncertainty about the photographic medium being able to provide access to a reality is compounded by the rise and spread of digital photography. The rise of digital images in everyday society in the late 1980s (Lister 1997: 1), and its widespread dissemination over the last two decades (Kriebel 2007: 38), present what many consider to be a radical break from analogue photography, particularly with regards to the supposed 'loss of the real' that it heralds for the photographic medium (see, for example, Matthews 1993; Mitchell 1994; Robins 1992). This transition is central to questions regarding the supposed 'truth value' of photographic images as such a value pivots on the "transition from the photo-mechanical image, a material analogue with its compelling sense of a referent in a prior reality, to the immaterial digital constructions and hybrids whose sources may be mathematical and 'virtual' as much as empirical" (Lister 1997: 4).<sup>81</sup>

The rise of digital photography is underscored by strong theoretical interest in its power to constitute a new relationship between images and reality. Responses to digital technology often emphasise (and celebrate) its role as a profound disturbance of traditional views on photographs as evidentiary documents – this can be seen in proclamations of digital technology bringing about the "death of photography" (Robins 1997: 29; 1992), or of ushering in a post-photographic era (Mitchell 1992), where photographic images can no longer be treated (or trusted) as passive vehicles of 'truth' (see also Crary 1992; Ritchin 1990). Among these writers on the post-/hyper-photographic era, William Mitchell's

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<sup>81</sup> On a technical level, the biggest difference between analogue and digital photography lies in the former's dependence on film and chemical processes, while the latter uses digitally encoded mathematical data to produce imagery (Kriebel 2007: 38-39; see also Baldwin 1991; Mitchell 1992). A digital photograph is composed of light-sensitive picture cells (or pixels) that are placed in a gridded pattern (this is a system of numbers that are electromagnetically stored), and that can be saved and altered on a computer, transmitted to a screen, or printed onto paper (Kriebel 2007: 39). While analogue photographs are tonally continuous, digital photography subdivides the visual field into a grid – ironically, digital photography's dependence on mathematical codes and visual grids lends itself to a seemingly more empirical, scientific mode of observation, while its virtual nature also renders it a more malleable, 'deceptive' medium than its analogue counterpart.

(1992) investigation of digital photography stands out as one of the most cited (and critiqued) sources on the subject. For Mitchell, the rupture between analogue and digital photography is profound – to such an extent that he casts digital technologies as signals of a post-photographic era, as critical points of unravelling in the modernist narrative of photographic ‘truth’. Analogue photographs offer an infinite amount of detail, argues Mitchell, while digital photographs are limited to their gridded microstructure (1992: 6).<sup>82</sup> In addition, the digital medium lends itself to transformation, and because of the easy manipulation of digital photographs through computational tools, the evidentiary force of the photographic medium is ultimately open to question. As such, digital images deviate “from the established regime of photographic truth” (1996: 16), and open-endedness supposedly pervades the medium as it allows for an understanding of the photographic medium as mutable.<sup>83</sup>

Nonetheless, the destabilisation of the notion that photographic images can offer an imprint of reality cannot be solely attributed to the rise of digital technologies – this ability has, in fact, been extensively questioned by authors who were already unconvinced about analogue photography’s ability to act as an evidentiary document (as demonstrated, to varying degrees, by the work of Sontag, Barthes and Sekula), as well as later writers who specifically interrogate what they see as a utopian imagining of the revolutionary power of digital technologies.<sup>84</sup> Even though both analogue and digital media are fraught with

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<sup>82</sup> According to Mitchell, this microstructure is an inherent limitation of the digital image to capture detail – something he sees as a severe complication of its referential value. This is evident, Mitchell argues, when one blows up the digital image, and is confronted by the limited frontiers of its representational power; that is, by the very pixels that constitute its make-up. This idea of enlarging an image to locate some hidden essence or minuscule truth bears striking similarities to Barthes’s examination of analogue photography and his dejected discovery that, when enlarged, a photograph reveals “nothing but the grain of the paper” (1981: 100). Whether in pixels or on paper, a grain of some sorts still seems to run through photographs in their visual manifestation – something that both Mitchell and Barthes see as a shortcoming of the photographic medium.

<sup>83</sup> The idea of digital photography being a more mutable medium is interpreted differently by each of the research participants, with Robert and Munir arguably being more aware than Charl of the possibility of digitally manipulating images. The notion of photographic ‘truth’ is also translated differently in each of the participants’ archives, be it in terms of analogue or digital photography. These issues are explored in more depth in Chapter 4.

<sup>84</sup> Being critical of what he identifies as the “progressivist agenda” of Mitchell and other writers, Kevin Robins warns of constructing “a false polarisation between past and future, between photography and digital culture” (1997: 33). The metaphysics of progress that underlies the digital revolution should be questioned, argues Robins, by acknowledging the restrictions and limitations that digital photography might hold, or even carry on from its analogue predecessor. Peter Buse (2010), Tom Gunning (2008) and Lev Manovich (2001, 2003) offers similar critiques by arguing that digital photography should be seen as a continuation of, and not a clean break from, analogue photography. In particular, Manovich is critical of Mitchell’s presumption that analogue photography was ever transparent or ‘innocent’ (that is unmanipulated or ‘normal’) in its depiction of reality – in fact, “digital technology does not subvert ‘normal’ photography, because ‘normal’ photography never existed” (2003: 245). The digital photograph’s relationship with reality is therefore no more (or less) complicated than that of an analogue photograph, as Buse, Gunning, Manovich and Robins contend (see also Baetens *et al.* 2007: 131-133; Van Dijck 2007).

questions around their supposed 'truthfulness', digital photography does present a break of sorts from analogue photography, especially as the latter is still often imagined as a more accurate document of reality. For Martin Lister, the difference between analogue and digital photography is necessarily mechanical and technological; however, it also shows a culturally entrenched belief in the veracity and evidential force that is still attached to the material, chemically produced image (1997: 11). As Andrew Murphie and John Potts (2003: 75-76) contend, digital image-making may not present a revolutionary break with the notion of photographic referentiality, yet their potential for manipulation has supplanted the photograph's guarantee of 'truth' in both academic writing and, importantly, in the popular imagination (see also Batchen 1990; Phillips 1993; Punt 1997). Whether as a celebration of its open-endedness or a critique of its inclination towards distorting the 'truth',<sup>85</sup> it seems as if digital technology has become synonymous with a visual refiguring of the photographic 'real'. As José van Dijck affirms, digital technologies have become social as much as technical processes that demonstrate how "manipulation and morphing are commonly accepted conditions for shaping personhood" (2007: 118).

Not only is the purported malleability of digital photography an issue that frequently surfaces in debates on contemporary forms of image-making, but the special relationship between the private and public spheres that this medium facilitates is also a point of discussion. According to Peter Buse (2010), digital photography builds on the legacy of Polaroid photography insofar as it eliminates the darkroom from the photomechanical process, which has strong implications for amateur photography as a private practice. Polaroid photography heralded a significant break in amateur photography as it allowed for photographed content to elude the scrutiny of an external, public gaze (Sealfon 1983: 6), thus rendering the medium the perfect tool for making the private visualisable and archivable, while still ensuring that the personal remains private. Likewise, digital photography allows for "freedom from the monitory gaze of the photochemist [which] means what might have been taboo now becomes picturable" (Buse 2010: 225). Digital photography thus allows for the human subject to visualise himself/herself in ways that are conceptualised as intimate and private, and that exist as personal knowledge of the self that does not have to be justified or defended in the public realm – a feature that has significant implications for my own investigation of the participants' personal archives. In

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<sup>85</sup> The malleability of digital media that is emphasised by Mitchell is often taken up in writings on the subject. Esther Leslie, for example, argues that "digitalised representations are infinitely manipulable, infinitely imitable. They are pure copy without origin, representation without represented, and so they evade the clutch of truth" (2003: 182). Allan Cohen (2007: 220) also contends that digital photography surrenders factualness for easy fabrication, and "the intangible digital reality refutes, even denies, our historical, scientific understanding of photography".

digital format the photographic archive can remain private, as it doesn't depend on an external party for the production and display of images of self.

For all the important changes that such technical developments in the realm of the photographic medium might signify (be it in terms of private/public relationship, or the malleability and shareability of the photographic image), Butler's opinion of the photographic image as a framing device that constructs an idea of reality still rings true. The ability of photographs (be they digital or analogue) to communicate is dependent on conceptual frameworks, and in order *to be readable* they are still presented, described, ordered, classified *and archived* in a certain way. When assessing the bearing that these debates on photography might have on my own investigation of personal photographic archives, the investment on the part of the research participants in the evidential value of the medium (be it in digital or analogue format) is important to consider. That does not imply that their reading of the medium is naïve, that they consider the device as a straightforward means of capturing 'the real', but rather that they see it as a site where (often conflicting) realities are framed and created. For these participants, the popular imagining of the photograph as a semblance of reality is the cause of much trouble, but also the actual means with which to fight such affliction, and to cite (or denounce) a photograph as 'real' has a significant bearing on their lives. The referential value of photography is simultaneously upheld and refuted by these participants for reasons that, as I show later in this study, are related to the display of their gender identities.

As David Green and Joanna Lowry suggest, the issue of photographic indexicality should perhaps be renegotiated so as to acknowledge photography as a "performative gesture" (2003), as a mode of inscription that points toward the idea and experience of 'reality' (see also Iverson 2007). This formulation draws attention to the human investment in photography as a reiterative gesture of bringing a subject to bear/to image. From this perspective, the question of 'photographic truthfulness' is supplanted (or at least supplemented) by an understanding of the human subject as a position that is discursively framed through acts of pointing to 'the world' or to 'the self' – acts that also give meaning to those very concepts. To think of photography's referential value is (for various complex reasons) to think of one's own relationship to 'reality' and to some material existence – a relationship that draws on and is embedded within performative practices of 'framing', 'looking for', and 'finding' oneself.

### 3.2 PHOTOGRAPHY AS AUTOBIOGRAPHIC DEVICE

*In autobiography, a person, solid and incontestable, testifies to having lived. An autobiography is a monument to the idea of personhood, to the notion that one could leave behind a memorial to oneself (just in case no one else ever gets around to it) and that the memorial would perform the work of permanence that the person never can. A self-memorial says: "I remember, and now, so will you" (Gilmore 2001: 13).*

Thus far the relationship between archival/photographic evidence, historical 'truth' and human subjectivity has been central to my investigation. Questions have been raised regarding the self and its ability to recollect, particularly through the medium of photography. This section elaborates on such an investigation by drawing on photography as a means of autobiographical recollection, as well as the medium's relation to textual and/or verbal forms of self-narration. This discussion provides a theoretical framework for my analysis of trans narratives of self that emerge through and in relation to photographic self-portraits. By drawing on the previous subchapter, in which discourses on photography's referential value were scrutinised, this section ties these discourses to photography's role in autobiographic recollection. Photographic narratives are often drawn upon in intersubjective and reparative processes of recollection, and this section provides a platform for investigating such processes. The next subchapter (Chapter 3.3) extends these ideas by investigating how discourses on autobiographic representation have been received within trans scholarship, and it provides a framework for approaching the photographic and textual accounts of self that were proffered by the three research participants.

Autobiography as a genre has a long tradition "as a Western mode of self-production, a discourse that is both corollary to the Enlightenment and its legacy, and which features a rational and representative 'I' at its centre" (Gilmore 2001: 2; see also Bruner 1991; Gergen & Gergen 1983; Maschuch 1996; Mykhalovskiy 1996). Such an account of autobiography as a means to bear evidence of a stable (Western) subject has been displaced by various writers who draw attention to autobiography as a variable, multivocal channel of expression that is defined as much by acts of over-enunciation as by censorship and fabrication (see for example Blanchard 1982; Gilmore 1994; Lionnet 1995; Kaplan 1992; Smith 1995; Smith 1998; Spivak 1998). Autobiography, as much as photography, has received much critical attention for the referential value that has long

been invested in this genre. Despite these challenges to the genre of autobiography, its structure and function still seem to be strongly invested in the representative project of “lending substance” to structures of identity – of “pushing an individual forward out of a dense set of relations” (Gilmore 2001: 12). In spite of a contemporary awareness of the potential for manipulation and fabrication, the consumers of autobiographic narratives, like the viewers of photographs, often choose to suspend their disbelief in these modes of communication, and this section is concerned with the manner in which such suspensions take place within the genre of autobiography. This genre provides fertile ground for investigating the role of visual and/or textual representations in the construction of identity. In addition, many of the issues around the contemporary usefulness of autobiography as a barometer of ‘truth’ echo debates on photography as an index of ‘reality’. For this reason questions around the referential significance of autobiographical recollection, and the relationship between photography and text in producing semblances of identity, point to key themes that run through the following sections.

### **3.2.1 Pledging the Self**

Philippe Lejeune’s (1989) study of autobiography provides an important point of departure in investigating this genre of self-representation, particularly as his analysis unsettles easy assumptions about the role of an ‘essential self’ who rationally and independently recollects from memory. Lejeune defines autobiography as a retrospective narrative that someone (an author) creates regarding their own existence, where the focus is their individual life and, in particular, the story of their personality.<sup>86</sup> While this definition seems to imply that autobiography is a clear-cut category that can be easily delineated, Lejeune acknowledges that it is in fact a very complex and unstable form of personal recollection. Of central concern to Lejeune is the fact that a written autobiography cannot be distinguished from a fictional text on the basis of textual evidence alone. In order for a work to be an autobiography, the author, narrator and subject (or protagonist) must be the same person – the author, the ‘I’ in the autobiography, must therefore be clearly identifiable and distinguishable throughout a given text. The existence of a person who writes or narrates is referenced through his or her own enunciation – personal pronouns, proper names, and the use of the first person are all

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<sup>86</sup> Lejeune’s definition is orientated towards autobiographical prose as a literary genre. His treatment of autobiography is therefore primarily concerned with acts of writing and with published autobiographies, while I employ the idea of ‘autobiographic narratives’ in a broader sense to encompass stories of self that are visualised, told and shared in various formats and through different media. I also apply the notion of ‘authorship’ to encompass photography as a visual narrative of sorts that is authored (created and/or applied) in a certain way.



“signatures” that designate a specific enunciator (Lejeune 1989: 10-11).<sup>87</sup> For Lejeune, an autobiographic piece pledges responsibility to a ‘real person’, to an author who provides traces in his/her text of a “world-beyond-the-text” (ibid.).<sup>88</sup>

Lejeune’s approach to autobiography is largely orientated towards the reader’s function in determining a text’s autobiographical value. A contract of sorts is needed, argues Lejeune, between the author and the reader to ensure that a given text is approached and interpreted as an autobiography – this contract Lejeune labels an “autobiographical pact” (1989: 13-14). The autobiographical pact can take on diverse dimensions, but central to its manifestation stands its function of honouring the signature of the author. This pact thus ensures that the author, the ‘I’, is discernible when dealing with a certain autobiographical narrative – for example, the identity of the author is continually affirmed throughout an autobiographical text, particularly by the use of the proper name, and this name (of the author, narrator, and/or subject) is the basis of the reader’s interpretation of the text (Lejeune 1989: 13-14). However, even though the identity of the author is assured by means of the autobiographical pact, it does not mean that the ‘I’ in the text necessarily resembles the author as ‘real person’ – in fact, Lejeune argues that an autobiography can be ‘inexact’ insofar as the subject that it presents can, to a large degree, bear little resemblance to the author.

“Identity is not resemblance” argues Lejeune (1989: 21), and the autobiographical pact can only ensure that the author – who exists “at the edge of the text” and is verified by a name – is identifiable to the reader. However, in order for the identity of the author to be a ‘copy’ of the real person, to provide referential information about a reality exterior to the text, and to resemble the ‘truth’, extra verification is needed. Such verification would take the form of a “referential pact” (1989: 22) – a contract that rests on and also

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<sup>87</sup> Lejeune’s formulation of authorial signatures bears some similarity to Derrida’s concept of the signature of the archivist (1998: 64), of a specific linguistic or nomological framework that simultaneously grants authority to archival collections, and leaves an indelible mark on the material that is recollected. Both autobiographical and archival signatures represent modes of recollection that designate a specific author/archivist, and that share a reiterative function of repeatedly calling their enunciator into being. This link between a Lejeunian and Derridean signature is picked up again in Chapter 4, when I look at the function of names in the autobiographical narratives of self that were proffered by the research participants.

<sup>88</sup> Paul de Man has specifically questioned the referential value of autobiography – that is its capacity to refer to the ‘real world’ – by arguing that “empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition”, and this lack of definition makes it difficult to distinguish autobiography, which is supposedly based on facts, from mere fiction (1979: 920). This perspective has been contested by various authors who, along with Lejeune, argue that the genre of autobiography has a long literary tradition, and that its referential value is facilitated by the author, and based on a process of writing and reading that is built into the very structure of autobiography (see, for example, Eakin 1985, 1992; Gudmundsdóttir 2003; Sheringham 1993; Sturrock 1993).



surpasses the authority of the autobiographical pact to the extent that it authenticates not only the existence of the author, but that it also assures the reader that the identity of the author as it is presented in the text is a true copy of reality. In order for an autobiographical narrative to be read as a resemblance of reality (and not just a sign of identity), the author somehow has to “swear to tell the truth” (1989: 22-23).<sup>89</sup>

Lejeune’s definition of autobiography draws attention to a complex network of references and relationships through which the author of a given text or narrative constructs an account of self, as well as a version of reality. This definition is important for the emphasis that it places on autobiography as a simultaneous sign of identity and a mechanism for suggesting (or imagining) a ‘reality’. These narratives might verify the existence of a real person, but they are not necessarily ‘truthful’ in their account of the real. In this regard, it seems as if discourses on autobiography and photography intersect insofar as authority is invested in their ability to provide evidence, albeit fragmented or fabricated forms of verification, of a self that exists in a certain historical and discursive framework.

Much writing on the autobiographic relationship between photography and text are situated against a theoretical background in which Barthes’s own analysis of this relationship figures quite strongly (see, for example, Burke 1992; Eakin 1992; Gudmundsdóttir 2003; Haverty Rugg 1997; Hirsch 1997; Rabaté 1997, to name but a few). In line with (and perhaps owing to) Barthes’s analysis of this relationship as necessarily complex and ambivalent, various writers have picked up on the way in which the referential value of photography seemingly lends credibility to an autobiographical text, while the text, in turn, stabilises or anchors the image. While Barthes emphasises the referential value of the photographic medium and its capacity to ‘say more’ and surpass the power of text as an index of reality, he still remains aware of the medium’s tendency to distort, as well as its embeddedness within systems of representation. Even though Barthes may consider text to be “parasitic” insofar as it relies on and suppresses the multiplicity of photographic meaning (1964: 25, 39), he is conscious of the fact that the knowledge that photographs present is not an untainted form of access to ‘the natural’ (or ‘the real’), but mediated reactions to the naturalised.

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<sup>89</sup> Certain texts lend themselves to and are invested in referential pacts, argues Lejeune, and this is specifically the case for certain historical texts and for journalism in general (1989: 23). Such texts are based on a model of resemblance, and the narrative is judged in terms of accuracy of information and fidelity of meaning (ibid.). The aim is to draw a response of “such as it was” (ibid.) from the reader of texts that make use of a referential pact.

Barthes's response to the referential value of photography, and its role of summoning 'the real' within autobiographic narratives, may place particular emphasis on photographs as evidential documents – as visual archives of the past that can verify textual claims. Yet Barthes also acknowledges that photographs have the power to petrify – to capture and solidify – the personal memories of a human subject. They function at the place where memory and a personal past break down (Barthes 1981: 91) – they fix as much as they create, and their tenuous relationship to reality is fraught with processes of loss, fabrication and constant recreation.<sup>90</sup> Hence neither photographs nor texts can offer a human subject access to the mnemonic 'real', but they are autobiographical tools that, in their combination, play an important role in imagining and representing the idea of the human subject's ability to recollect (and thus reconnect with) their past within a shared historical framework.

Both Lejeune's formulation of autobiography and Barthes's conception of photography share a belief in the capacity of the genre/medium to impart the identity of an author or subject, yet both are aware that such processes of interaction are not straightforward or one-sided. The ability to glean (or imagine) a sense of identity from the surface of a document, be it textual or photographic, or even both, is dependent on a relationship between an author and/or subject and a reader or viewer, and this relationship relies on a shared vocabulary from which meaning can be wrought. Such a perspective is also taken up by Linda Haverty Rugg (1997), who argues that autobiography as a form of writing and photography as a means of visualisation are intricately enmeshed with a human project of providing evidence of human existence. They seem to anchor the human subject in the world as they "insist on the verifiable presence of an embodied and solid individual ... of an integrated, authorial self, located in a body, a place, and a time" (Haverty Rugg 1997: 2). Photography and autobiography also share a profound exertion of control over the human self-image, as both constitute an act of looking at oneself and "authorising" one's own life – of "claiming a kind of privilege for one's own account" (1997: 4-5).

Despite the purported level of control over self-image that both autobiography and photography grant the human subject, both these modes of representation are fraught with conflation, multiplicity and a lack of control, and are indelibly invested in (and determined by) systems of communication. The idea of a stable autobiographical/authorial self that emerges from texts and photographs is therefore undercut by various difficulties. Firstly, it is crucial to acknowledge that the very language (be it visual or textual) that is used to

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<sup>90</sup> Marianne Hirsch also reads Barthes's *Camera Lucida* as a testimony of the photograph's opaque (rather than transparent) nature, and argues that this book demonstrates how "text and image, intricately entangled in a narrative web, work in collaboration to tell a complicated story of loss and longing that Barthes's critical terminology can barely approximate" (1997: 4).

'gain access' to the self is far from transparent, and is affected by technological and cultural discourses – the previous section specifically dealt with some of these discourses that impact on photography as a visual language. Secondly, the autobiographical and photographic narratives of a particular human subject are often constituted as divergent, even disparate versions of self. As Haverty Rugg argues, the integrity of their referential value is undercut by multiple presentations of a human subject out of which a seemingly essential, solidified author emerges.<sup>91</sup>

The authorial function of photographs is, to a certain degree, also more complicated than that of autobiographical writings – while an author writes his/her own life story, photographs are often dependent on the interjection of a third party who records the image (Haverty Rugg 1997: 2). This is particularly evident in forms of self-portraiture where it is largely assumed that the photographic medium allows for a subject to represent himself or herself as they 'really are' or as they 'see themselves', while in many cases photographic self-portraits are taken by someone else – another person is needed, someone to aim and operate the camera, or even to fulfil the simple task of pressing a button. However, this person is not necessarily treated as the author of the image, but rather as a necessary component in the process of photography. He/she fulfils a mechanical/technical and often anonymous task, and while their presence can be assumed, it is rarely visible in the photographic image.<sup>92</sup>

While the creation of a photographic self-portrait might present a more circuitous route towards self-authorship insofar as other people could be 'utilised' to take/create an image, I would argue that an autobiographical pact of sorts establishes a link, firstly, between the author and subject of a photographic self-portrait, and secondly, between the author/subject and the viewer of the particular image. The subject of a photographic self-portrait can claim authorship in various ways – for example, the subject can allude to the

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<sup>91</sup> One of the instances where the multiplicity of the autobiographical self can be seen is in the "otheredness" of the subject that is visibly produced through photography (Haverty Rugg 1997: 17). This understanding of photographic self-portraiture is aligned with Barthes's assertion that "the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity" (1981: 12). Louis Renza (1997: 317) also calls attention to the "phantom third person" that photographs create in autobiographical discourse. This idea is picked up again in Chapter 4.2 when I deal with forms of dissociation that occur in retrospective readings of photographs.

<sup>92</sup> While this can largely be seen in everyday snapshots where an outsider is 'used' to take a photograph, there are definitely exceptions to this phenomenon of circuitous self-authorship. There are, for example, photographs where the function and identity of an artist or specific person is important for understanding the narrative or context of the image. Digital technologies (such as cellphone or computer cameras) also allow for people to document themselves without the help of other people, so this role of photographic authorship is complex and definitely not stable – an issue that I revisit in Chapter 4.1.

referential value of photographs as ‘copies’ of reality (as images in which a subject can identify that “this is me”), the subject can edit photographs (thus choosing the image that best reflects the “me”), or photographs can be manipulated to best resemble the subject as they see themselves. In this way, the subject of a photographic self-portrait can claim a degree or a form of authorship by arguing that, by virtue of their presence in the photograph, their possession of the image and/or their ability to use, transform and discard the image, they are at once the subject and author of the photograph. In this instance, the roles of archivist and author are thus tied to a project of representing subjectivity – of ‘taking control’ over an image of self.

This idea has particular relevance to my research project, as it shows how ideas of ‘authorship’ and ‘ownership’ are facilitated through autobiographic practices – ideas that are of critical importance to the research participants of this study. In addition, it underscores an understanding that forms of representation can be pivotal to projects where the identification of a self (or of different selves) within a visual/textual paradigm is held in high regard. According to Haverty Rugg, the underlying function of an autobiographical pact within both written autobiographies and photographic self-portraits is to refer to something beyond the medium itself, a subject, that is referenced and called into being (1997: 6). Photographs function in an autobiographical context as signs of “something material, the *embodied* subject, the unification (to recall the autobiographical pact) of author, name, and body” (1997: 13, my emphasis; see also Wilson 2007). At the same time, Haverty Rugg also emphasises that any reading of autobiographical texts and photographic self-portraits should be sensitive towards forms of self-representation as changing and intersecting processes of expression and performance that always form part of a larger (discursive) framework.

Such a definition resonates with Foucault’s (1984b) argument that authorship is not the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual, but it is a complex system whose purpose is to construct an entity that we recognise as an ‘author’. Foucault is of the opinion that, as a means of classification, the name and idea of the ‘author’ always “remains at the contours of texts – separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterising their mode of existence” (1984b: 107). In this way, the “function of an author is to characterise the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society” (1984b: 107-108). For Foucault, authorship does not point towards a singular, creative role, but it rather emerges under specific conditions and through certain forms, and is thus a complex position through which subjects emerge into discourse (1984b: 110). Rather than

seeing authorship as a product of stable, singular selfhood, such a perspective rather emphasises the idea of authorship to be exercised at the intersection of various ideas of self and discourses on subjectivity.<sup>93</sup>

The relationships that are facilitated between image and text, and between the roles of author, archivist and reader, are central to my own investigation of the personal photographic archives that were created by the research participants. Firstly, the relationship between image and text is important as the material that I collected during a series of interviews with these participants consists of both photographs and accompanying verbal/written explanations of these images. This chapter has demonstrated the relationship between autobiographical texts and images to be complex in its make-up, and the divergent visual/textual narrations of self that I encountered in my research testify to such an understanding of autobiographical self-representation. Secondly, the relationship between the author and the reader/viewer is also crucial for understanding the process through which this project/thesis took its shape. During the interviews my own role as a reader/viewer necessarily framed the way in which the information was presented and relayed by the research participants, and an autobiographical pact of sorts was established that informed my own reading and interpretation of the images and narratives that were presented. This pact is, at the same time, intersubjective as the relationship between the participants and myself allowed for ideas of self to be shared, interpreted and reviewed.

This approach calls for a departure from Lejeune's formulation of autobiography, particularly with regards to the reader's function in determining a given text's autobiographical value. In the context of my research, an autobiographical pact is not merely drawn upon to interpret a certain text/photograph/narrative, but such a pact is central to processes of construction and exchange, and the identities of the author(s) are referenced as much as they are actually *constructed* by this pact and the textual/visual dimensions that it takes. While Lejeune sees the pact as a route back to the author, I would argue that autobiography can be conceived of as a much more intersubjective process, through which both the route to and the idea of 'author' are constituted. The next section

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<sup>93</sup> This idea is also reiterated by Marianne Hirsch (1997: 83-84) who states that "autobiography and self-portraiture share with photography a presumed referential basis and proximate relationship to truth which disguises their mediated and constructed qualities". Both the autobiographical act and the photographic medium are central to the illusion of the self's wholeness, argues Hirsch, while they actually point towards the fragmentary structure of selfhood that is masked by textual and visual forms of self-representation. See also Timothy Dow Adams (1994) on such a definition of selfhood.

elaborates on such a perspective by investigating autobiography and its function within intersubjective processes of recollection.

### **3.2.2 The Intersubjective Recollection of Self**

In my investigation of the archive and of photography, I have emphasised perspectives on recollection that seek to unsettle easy assumptions of its relationship with both human history and subjectivity as uncomplicated. It is especially the latter aspect of this relationship that is destabilised by theorisations of memory as a site of intersubjective recollection and recreation. If conceived of as a material social practice – as a platform for the interaction between different human subjects – autobiography has profound implications for the authorial role that the subject assumes in both photographic and textual systems of representation. Such processes of interaction also allow for autobiographic practices to function in a reparative manner, as photography's recollective imagining provides a space for self-reflexive and socially interactive practices of fictioning, restoring and imagining a personal history. Constantina Papoulias (2003), for example, holds a perspective on memory as a social process to demonstrate that memory is not by necessity an individual faculty (as has traditionally been held), but rather a technique of framing experience that is generated through social interaction. According to such a view, the personal aspect of a human subject's memory is not unconditionally tied to an "inner world of thought" (Papoulias 2003: 116), but the personal aspect of memory is derived from a subject's social position and his or her relationship to other subjects. Papoulias maintains that "what appears as an individual's unique inner world of memory is in fact nothing other than the uniqueness of the layering of social memories. Thus the particularity of memory is an effect of the coming together of several social vocabularies of experience within each individual" (2003: 116).

Other authors share such a perspective of memory as shaped by processes of internalisation and exchange. For Susannah Radstone (2000), social memory does not point to a straightforward internalisation of societal norms and histories, neither to the human subject as a completely autonomous agent who consciously acts on these norms, but to a more ambivalent and intersubjective relationship that is facilitated through the exchange of memory (see also Fentress & Wickham 1992; Gedi & Elam 1996; Lipsitz 1990; Olick & Robbins 1998). Hence, memory can be seen as a "social bond" (Papoulias 2003: 117) through which the exchange of narratives of self is made possible. According to such a definition, "memory becomes equivalent to an inventory of bodily practices through which certain aspects of a past are continued into the present, as well as to the

relational and intersubjective space of exchange through which aspects are constituted and maintained. In this sense, memory works as the privileged instantiation of a space in-between” (ibid.). Memory provides a space that is neither individual nor collective, Papoulias maintains, but it is profoundly intersubjective. Such an idea also resonates with Jonathan Boyarin’s argument that “memory cannot be strictly individual, inasmuch as it is symbolic and hence intersubjective. Nor can it be literally collective, since it is not superorganic but embodied” (1994: 26). These viewpoints posit memory as located somewhere between the subject and the social, between the discursive and the embodied, and its takes on a profoundly performative dimension.<sup>94</sup>

By seeing memory as an intersubjective practice, Jens Brockmeier (2010) also posits narrative as a central part of memory making – for Brockmeier, narratives provide the human subject with a means of contextualising memories and ideas of self. Narrative processes of recollection are specifically highlighted by Brockmeier for their potential to disrupt the traditional notion of memory as a storage space – an idea that he labels the “archival model” of memory.<sup>95</sup> This archival model is critiqued for its emphasis on memory “as a static and stable place of storage, where past perceptions and experiences are retained and from where they can be retrieved” (Brockmeier 2010: 10). Along these lines, the idea of the human as an archive is destabilised by rather emphasising memory as shaped by processes of intersubjective negotiation – the human being does not *recollect* memory, Brockmeier seems to argue, but he/she rather *renegotiates* their sense of history and of self through processes of narrative interaction. Such a perspective has, however, been criticised, particularly for its somewhat utopian vision of narrative memory as a radical break from archival models. James Wertsch (2011), for example, argues that Brockmeier presents a monolithic view of archival memory as the latter has never been seen as such a stable medium as Brockmeier sketches it out to be, and that narrative memory might be a different way of conceiving of mnemonic recollection, but that certain issues (such as the issue of the agency of the narrator) remain unaddressed in narrative models.

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<sup>94</sup> These perspectives bear striking similarities to a Butlerian conception of subjectivity. Butler underscores the intersectional nature of subjectivity by arguing that the subject is situated at a crossroads between power and determining power (1997b) – the subject is a complex linguistic-somatic entity that is reiteratively manifested, and never ‘resolved’ in any way. Butler’s understanding of human subjectivity as both an effect and condition of discourse, as well as gender as a socio-somatic experience, is reiterated in the conception of memory as intersubjective – as something that is constituted *between* individuals, instead of solely residing *within* the individual.

<sup>95</sup> See also Morris Koriath and Asher Goldsmith (1996) for a critical discussion of what they call the “storehouse metaphor” of memory.

Michael Bamberg (2010: 5) shares a conceptualisation of narrative as central to identity construction, as it enables a human subject to “take a reflective position vis-à-vis the self”, while he also attends to issues regarding the agency of the “I-as-subject”. For Bamberg, issues of agency underscore a narrative model of identity, as such a model simultaneously breaks from and extends an archival version of recollection. For this reason Bamberg argues that the question of “who is in control” in narrative processes of recollection should not be treated as a binary division of the individual (the inside) versus the social (the outside), but that these poles form part of a dynamic process that is continually in flux (2010: 7).

While an intersubjective account of memory destabilises the idea of the human subject as an autonomous mnemonic archive, issues surrounding the fictionality of autobiographic accounts of self also unsettle the veracity and stability of human recollection. Even though autobiographic recollection is largely valued for its referential value, questions of fictionality also affect the genre. For Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir (2003), autobiographical processes are necessarily fictional insofar as they draw on subjective histories and (changing) personal recollections as much as they are vehicles for expressing fantasies and desires. Johnnie Gratton (1997: 253) provides a similar perspective by arguing that the performative dimension of autobiographical recollection highlights the “act of making”, while the “act of making up” is a basic performative supplement in such processes of remembering. Gudmundsdóttir and Gratton contend that processes of autobiographic recollection are fictional to the extent that human recollection is never a straightforward practice of showing ‘the past’, but that it actually points toward a subject who interacts with (and is informed by) a network of people/texts/images to produce an account of self that is never autonomous or completely ‘true’.

Insofar as processes of autobiographic narration provide the space to negotiate the past in an intersubjective manner, it follows that such forms of narration provide the human subject with the means to imagine and reconstruct the self. In this regard, Karl Figlio (2003) emphasises autobiography as a reparative task through which a person revises the past. It provides the human subject with the ability to remake the past without unwanted features, and to re-write history in such a way that a “revivified”, “restored” and “repaired” version of the self emerges (2003: 155). Through this process, “memory becomes akin to imagination rather than to an assemblage or recollection of objects in the mind” (2003: 154). Consequently, autobiographical narratives become a meeting point for various timeframes, of the past as it is remembered/imagined and the future as it is anticipated



(2003: 160), and these narratives oscillate between experience, loss and recreation (see also Gilmore 2001; Lambeck & Antze 1996). To narrate the self is not a process of merely bringing memory to the surface of expression, but, as Figlio argues, it is also a means of reconstructing memory. The way in which we treat and present narratives of self as “the traces of the past ... expresses the continuous process of invading, destroying, rebuilding, fearing, loving, respecting, repairing. To preserve a moment of the past is to infiltrate it at the same time as to keep it alive” (2003: 162).

These perspectives on autobiographical modes of representation as reparative and intersubjective are central to my own analysis of the specific accounts of self that were proffered by the three trans men who participated in this study. Autobiographical narratives point towards memory as something that is made social by processes of mnemonic externalisation – the act of storing (or narrating) memory and selecting materials/methods to allow for such forms of recollection is based on social codes that form the basis of structures of knowledge (Jedlowski 2001: 4; see also Bowker 2005). In addition, such a perspective resonates with the idea that photography is an autobiographical tool for self-construction (Jay 1994) – as much as the self is sustained through (and dependent on) language in autobiographical texts, the self exists through the photographic medium. As William Mitchell argues, “if media are middles, they are ever-elastic middles ... [as] the medium does not lie between the sender and receiver; it includes and constitutes them” (2005: 204).<sup>96</sup> As this subchapter has demonstrated, photography constitutes such a “middle” that, in combination with text, not only pledges some idea of self, but also allows for such an idea to become socially manifested.

### 3.3 THE SCOPOPHILIC LENS: PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE (IN)VISIBILITY OF TRANS MEN

A complex system of concealment and exposure defines the photographic archives that were created by the three research participants. By drawing on the discourses of photographic recollection that have been investigated in the previous two subchapters, this subchapter is specifically concerned with how notions of a (trans) self are made visible within the public arena. As demonstrated thus far, autobiographic modes of representation emphasise an understanding of photography as a means to frame an idea of self, and of bringing this idea into (social) discourse. This subchapter is concerned with the implications

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<sup>96</sup> Mitchell elaborates on this perspective by arguing that “a medium is both a system and an environment ... A medium, in short, is not just a set of materials, an apparatus, or a code that ‘mediates’ between individuals. It is a complex social institution that contains individuals within it, and is constituted by a history of practices, rituals, and habits, skills and techniques, as well as by a set of material objects and spaces” (2005: 213).

that such a process holds for the trans men who participated in this study. By tracing discourses on trans visibility (Chapter 3.3.1), and demonstrating how these discourses are responded to in specific examples of trans autobiography (Chapter 3.3.2), this subchapter provides a platform from which to engage with the intersection of the personal and the public, the textual and the visual, the discursive and the corporeal, as well as the visible and the invisible within the realm of the photographic archive.

### **3.3.1 The Public Visibility of Trans Subjectivities**

As an archival schema, photography has played a considerable role in tracing both the delineation and convergence of public and private discourses. Pierre Bourdieu argues in this regard that “the arrival of the domestic practice of photography coincides with a more precise differentiation between what belongs to the public and what to the private sphere” (1990: 29), and that photography therefore has an inherently regulatory function as it determines and stabilises social norms (Schwartz 2000: 16). Don Slater (1997: 129) also concurs that photographs have a domesticating function, as they mediate between the private and public spheres, and they facilitate a flow of images and information from the one domain to the other.<sup>97</sup> Photography is central to the infiltration of public discourse into the private sphere, argues Slater, as “the camera ... [became] a central signifier of modernity at home” (1997: 137). As a technological and ideological apparatus, the camera acts both as a capturing device of, and a channel for, discourses around the private and the public. Through photography the personal can be made public and shared amongst a certain population, and photography is therefore not only important for establishing bodies of knowledge, but also for determining the public to whom these knowledges can be revealed. Photography thus shares with the archive the function of creating a public and/or private audience for its systems of knowledge.

The ability of human subjects to disclose, visualise and enact certain facets of their identity within the public arena is intricately tied to discourses on social respectability. These discourses have significant consequences for trans subjects, especially in terms of how they visualise, document and archive their lives. While the medium of photography has played

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<sup>97</sup> As a domesticating medium, photography is also caught up in structures of leisure and home entertainment, and Slater outlines the development of photography from its introduction as a leisure activity by Eastman in the form of the Kodak Camera in the 1880s, to the rise of photography as a digital commodity in contemporary society. This development is central to ideas around photography as a medium to “tell one’s own stories” (1997: 144), and to conceptualise of a difference between – and, increasingly, an overlapping of – photographic self-representations that are aimed at the private or the public domains (see also Thompson 1990).

a significant role in providing a public record of trans lives, these records are not uncomplicated as various conflicting discourses inform the manner in which such lives are made visible and public. By tracing discourses on the private and public, forms of trans (in)visibility is discussed in relation to autobiographic modes of recollection.

Being linked to notions of respectability, the relationship between the private and the public spheres has played a large role in determining which actions/identities should be concealed (thus consigned to the private sphere) and which can be publically displayed. The relationship between the private and public is strongly rooted in modernist notions of Western society as the epitome of rational and democratic civic relations, with the public sphere serving as the 'moral environment' that regulates civic discourses.<sup>98</sup> Both the public and the private are tied to conceptions of morality as social, cultural and political institutions determine their relationship to one another:

The public and the private as twin force fields help to create a moral environment for individuals, singly and in groups; to dictate norms of appropriate or worthy action; to establish barriers to action, particularly in areas such as the ... regulation of sexual relations, promulgation of familial duties and obligations, and the arena of political responsibility (Elshtain 1981: 5).

In Western discourse the private/public divide serves as an enabling structure that governs the sexual and gendered citizenship of individuals (Joseph 1997), as well as the gendering and racialisation of space (Eisenstein 1994). With the demarcation of separate private and public spheres built on simultaneous processes of disempowerment and empowerment, "the demarcation of public and private life within society is an inherently political process that both reflects and reinforces power relations, especially the power relations of gender,

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<sup>98</sup> The notion of the public sphere as a bastion of rationality is largely influenced by Jürgen Habermas's formulation of the subject in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). Habermas presents the public sphere as the constitution of bourgeois public society that (in its ideal form) is made up of private people who are gathered as a public to articulate the needs of society. The public sphere, which is in essence tied to a modern humanist commitment to the autonomy of the individual, can be seen as a network that supposedly enables 'democratic', 'rational' communication (Johnson 2006: 1). According to Habermas, the public sphere created the ideal social conditions for rational-critical debates about social, political and cultural issues, as opposed to 'irrational', private issues (Calhoun 1996: 1-2). Habermas's formulation of the public sphere is much contested for its hierarchic implementation of the private and the public, and for its enunciation of hegemonic forces that dictate which discourses can be allowed into public circulation. Zygmunt Bauman (1999: xvi) argues that the imposition of private/public boundaries converts culture into a "handmaiden of social order" through which society can regulate that which is deemed 'abnormal'. Nancy Fraser (1990) also draws attention to the fact that marginalised groups are excluded from the 'universal', hegemonic public sphere as it is formulated by Habermas, while Michael Warner (1992) is of the opinion that deviance from societal norms is often erased from the supposedly 'democratic' public sphere.

sexuality, race, and class” (Sullivan 1995: 128).<sup>99</sup> The location within and movement between the public and private spheres are determined relationally and refer to hierarchic positions ranging from individuals or groups who are marginalised, socially isolated and restricted in their public expression of their identities and/or bodies,<sup>100</sup> to those who have the agency to move freely between the spheres and to visualise themselves within public spaces (Madanipour 2003: 235-237).

The dichotomous structure of public/private is also supported by a chain of binaries which provide a hierarchic barrier between normalised identities and their ‘deviant’ counterparts – cisgender/transgender, heterosexual/homosexual, as well as male/female and white/black being examples of polarised identities that found their ‘socially acceptable’ expressions located in separate spheres. Of importance to my investigation of gender identity is that those people whose presentation of a gendered self falls outside binary structures are often “stigmatised, ostracised, and socially delegitimised to the extent that they may fail to be socially recognised” (Gagné *et al.* 1997: 480). This is particularly relevant to the trans men who participated in this study, as they often describe their position within society as an impasse between fitting in (as men) and standing out (as trans men) within public spaces.<sup>101</sup> As an effect, the *transness* of their identities (that is, the signs – be they corporeal or discursive – of having transitioned or of being in the process of transitioning) is often suppressed in public spaces in order to gain access to official discourse; that is, to pass as men in order to be recognised as human. At the same time, this research project is complicit in making some aspect of their personal lives and identities visible, and of taking into consideration (and, perhaps, also renegotiating) some of the private/public boundaries that impact on their lives.

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<sup>99</sup> The requirements for ‘rational deliberation’ within the public sphere have long privileged the white, heterosexual male and his “modes of public speech and behaviour by defining them as universal norms” (Crawford 1995: 4). Central to this conception of public space as a core of ‘normality’ stands heterosexual culture as a barometer of acceptable sexual conduct. Heterosexuality acts in modern Western society as a hegemonic structure that establishes the public as a “sanitised space”, a space of “pure citizenship” that “bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy” (Berlant & Warner 1998: 554; see also Landzelius 2004; Phillips 2004).

<sup>100</sup> It is not only the ‘respectability’ of identity constructions, but also the ‘acceptability’ of corporeal expressions that are determined by the discourses of the public sphere. According to Ali Madanipour (2003: 22), the body is closely linked to private/public distinctions as it is regarded as the primary physical boundary between the self and other. A desired level of privacy can be maintained through controlling the body and its representation, and the movement between personal and public spaces can be manipulated by monitoring the amount of private (bodily) detail that is revealed to the public.

<sup>101</sup> During the interviews it became clear that the visibility of their transness is of critical importance to the participants, as they regard it as something that can render them precarious – this is an issue that I elaborate on in Chapter 4, when I deal with specific examples of photographic exposure. Such a perspective is also corroborated by local texts where attention is specifically drawn to the violence and intolerance with which local non-conforming gender identities are often met in public spaces (Morgan *et al.* 2009; Rheeder 2010; Theron 2008a, 2008b).

In this regard, this thesis forms part of a larger project of drawing on autobiographical narratives and photographs to negotiate the relationship of certain (erased or marginalised) identities with public discourse. For example, Dean Kotula's compilation of autobiographic essays in *The Phallus Palace* (2002), Morty Diamond's collection of autobiographic essays in *From the Inside Out* (2004), and Jonathan Ames's anthology of transsexual memoirs in *Sexual Metamorphosis* (2005) are but some of the important texts that specifically deal with trans men and their accounts of self. While these texts deal predominantly with American or European stories of trans lives, Ruth Morgan, Charl Marais and Joy Wellbeloved's book *Trans* (2009) is one of the only texts that present a collection of local autobiographical trans narratives, of which several focus specifically on trans men. These books share a perspective on autobiography as a key tool for creating awareness of trans-related issues amongst the general public. In this regard, they seem to demonstrate a common goal of trans autobiography of putting trans lives into the public domain (Prosser 1998: 130).

The specific use of photographs as autobiographic documents that can 'prove' the existence of trans identities presents a divergent array of responses, particularly from within trans communities themselves. One of the strongest responses to photography is that it can be seen as an important tool for responding to the silence that pervades trans lives within the public arena. For example, Jason Cromwell (1999) argues that the visibility of trans men is crucial for self-empowerment, and that it serves a political agenda insofar as it supports the construction of socio-political identities, the education of the public on trans matters, the reclaiming of history, and that it is particularly useful for fighting for trans rights at a national level (see also Bolin 1994; Sullivan 1990). Producing images of trans men in the media, Cromwell argues, is necessary to "demythologise" such subjects, and to provide a nuanced account of the diversity that characterises their lives (1999: 142).

According to Benjamin Singer (2006), such accounts of diversity are particularly important given the role that photography has played in producing a medical model of transsexuality as a pathological condition. Photography's aura of unmediated reality has lent itself to the medical gaze, particularly as it was used to map the gender 'deviance' of nonstandard bodies (Singer 2006: 602-604).<sup>102</sup> Trans bodies were often framed in photographs to furnish scientific 'evidence' of psychological and corporeal abnormality

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<sup>102</sup> See also Griselda Pollock's (1998) investigation of Western conventions of representation in which the "mastering eye/I" establishes a hierarchical relationship between itself and the subject that it reproduces on a two-dimensional surface.

(Meyerowitz 2002), and these images were commonly used in medical texts as tools for tracing and categorising 'transsexuality' as a pathology. Photography was employed in medical/scientific discourses to promote a perspective on 'transsexuality' as a type, and of framing 'transsexual bodies' as specimens that can be captured, studied and transformed into public knowledge. Photography thus served the function of reducing such bodies and subjectivities to depictions of Otherness, both within scientific discourse and the public imagination (Singer 2006: 604).

Contemporary photographs of/by trans subjects often try to displace the medical gaze that has long grazed their bodies. Such images have a disruptive function as they call attention to the "profound silence and passivity" (Singer 2006: 608) of medical photographs of trans subjects. By implicating the viewer in the act of looking and disrupting the voyeurism that underlies the medical gaze, photographic self-portraits allow trans subject to "talk back" and "look back" (2006: 609; see also Halberstam 1998). In addition, they can also provide a platform for visualising the social situation of trans lives (ibid.) – they can show the trans subject in a specific social (and everyday) setting, thus contributing to a displacement of the clinical dimension of the medical gaze. According to Singer, photographs therefore have a profoundly ethical dimension within a trans context, as they show the viewer how to relate to a trans subject, and they provide a document that substantiates the subject's claim to recognition.<sup>103</sup>

Autobiographic photographs of trans subjectivities can also respond to the sensationalism that is often a characteristic of the depiction of trans identities in the media. Representations of 'transsexual bodies' through sensationalist journalism have had a tremendous impact on the public imagination (Meyerowitz 2002), with sex reassignment surgery specifically exploited as a "spectacle" to demonstrate the power of science and health technologies for 'curing' gender deviance (Shelly 2008: 133-134; see also Namaste 2004). With the media often using images of trans subjects for their purportedly 'spectacular' nature – to inspire affect and desire, and to entertain or shock (Shelly 2008:

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<sup>103</sup> Singer's argument is somewhat conflicted, particularly as his formulation still supports an idea of photography as a curio-like object that captures and essentialises 'the' trans subject, albeit for the education of the cisgender viewer. It is also important to consider that photography has the power to render *all* human subjects the object of a normative gaze (admittedly, not all subjects are equally affected or subordinated by the gaze), and to argue for an 'ethical' consideration of photography should not be seen as isolated to the trans context. What Singer's argument does highlight is that the scopophilic effect of the camera can perhaps be usurped (or at least critically referenced) by subjects as they assume the role of archivist – as they draw on images *and narrative* in order to curate and (re)frame a certain story, whether for private or public knowledge.

134) – popular representations of trans people remain transfixed upon their exotic, eroticised Otherness.

At the same time, the positive impact of the media on trans identities is also underlined. Media depictions of trans people can generate self-reflexive understanding, and can facilitate the coming-out process of trans men and women (Ringo 2002). The media can play a central role in the formation of trans identities (Shelly 2002: 139), and their power to create awareness speaks to both a trans and cisgender audience (see also Cordova 1992; Cromwell 1999). This understanding is particularly relevant to my own study as the research participants share a view of the media as a form of trans empowerment – not only did the media play a crucial role in their lives by ‘awakening’ them to the possibility of their own status as trans men, but they also see the media (to varying degrees) as important for creating awareness amongst the general South African public. The visual representation of trans identities can therefore play an important role in contesting negative stereotypes, while it also addresses the lack of exposure to these identities within the South African social landscape.

### **3.3.2 Cultures of Confession: On Passing and Disclosure**

The visibility of trans identities, however, is more complex than merely providing positive visual reference for trans or cisgendered people. If autobiographic presentations of self are considered to be constituted by social processes (an idea that I have specifically highlighted thus far), such forms of interaction are not free of hierarchy or normative convention. For Leigh Gilmore autobiography is firmly situated within a culture of confession and, if read within a testimonial context, the notion of ‘giving penance’ is significant in autobiographical modes of self-expression (2001: 2, 14). Autobiography does not exert its authority through its resemblance to ‘real life’, Gilmore argues, but rather on the basis of its proximity to discourses of ‘truth’, and from the power it draws from acts of atonement that transform the private into the public (2001: 3-4).<sup>104</sup>

In the case of trans acts of confession, Jamison Green argues that trans subjects often “pay for the privilege” of telling their stories as they are expected to publically confess and

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<sup>104</sup> See also Gayatri Spivak’s (1998: 7) discussion of a culture of testimony that produces a hierarchic relationship between the subaltern (who is forced to give witness to and confess of oppression) and a less oppressed other.

recite their “litanies of struggle and change” (2006: 500).<sup>105</sup> At the same time, autobiographic narratives and images of self are considered to be vital to acts of self-exploration and public visibility for trans subjects. For Jonathan Ames, autobiographic narratives can be seen as coming-of-age stories for trans men and women – they are rites of passage that chart the psychological and physical transition of such individuals (2005: xii). This section picks up on these different perspectives by exploring trans autobiography as a simultaneously confessional and empowering means of expression.

In investigating the role of confession, Butler’s analysis of disclosure as a means of complying with/making use of structures of power is particularly relevant. By drawing on Foucault’s (1980b) investigation of confession as an imposed compulsion to disclose,<sup>106</sup> Butler (2004b) demonstrates how the act of confession is controlled by authoritative discourses. For Butler, confessing to certain desires and acts is a means to constitute oneself – it becomes the scene of identity and the locus of the body (2004b: 165). Butler emphasises the act of confession as a bodily act, as “whatever is said not only passes through the body but constitutes a certain presentation of the body” (2004b: 172). Along these lines, confession can be seen as a “bodying forth” of information about the self, and a “stylised assertion” of the body as *self* (ibid.). To confess also counts on a technique of framing that which is confessed as completed – as Butler maintains, “to publish one’s act in language is in some sense the completion of the act” (2004b: 167). However, this technique of framing is not a singular performative act, but it is reiterative and intersubjective – the meaning of the confessional is produced between different subjects, one who confesses to another, and it therefore constitutes a mode of “doing something together” (2004b: 173). This idea resonates with a conception of gender as a reiterative social comportment – a way of confessing a particular identity with and for others.

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<sup>105</sup> Green describes these public confessions within educational/classroom settings, and he uses scientific metaphors – such as transsexual subjects as “laboratory rats” and “frogs in the dissection tray” (2006: 500) – to draw a parallel to earlier medical and scientific studies of transsexuality. For all the differences between a modern classroom and a laboratory, Green manages to draw attention to persisting hierarchies that exist between the transsexual subject as an object of investigation, as *something* that yields its secrets to the enquiring gaze, and scientific/academic researchers.

<sup>106</sup> Foucault is specifically interested in the transformation of sex into discourse through the “confession of the flesh” (1980b: 19-20), that is, through an act of bodily disclosure. For Foucault, modernist discourse created a regulated and polymorphous incitement to confession within Western society, which in turn led to a wide range of devices for listening, recording, transcribing and redistributing information (1980b: 34). From its emergence in the eighteenth century to its rise and proliferation in modern society, confession has become a political, economic and technical incitement to disclose, and Foucault sees this compulsion as central to the conception of Western subjectivity.



The discourse of confessing of a particular identity is made all the more complex in trans narrations of self. The idea that gender is governed by confessional acts takes on a loaded meaning when used to describe the disclosure of trans identities. This can be ascribed to the way in which acts of confession are central to the medical ‘treatment’ of transsexuality. Bernice Hausman draws specific attention to the way in which the category of ‘transsexuality’ has a conceptual and material relation to medical discourse insofar as “transsexuals must seek and obtain medical treatment in order to be recognised as *transsexuals*” (1995: 3, emphasis in original). Medical discourses “authorise” transsexuality, Hausman maintains (1995: 4), and the act of confessing of transsexuality means that one adopts the normative gender model that these discourses endorse.

This perspective has been severely criticised, particularly by trans writers such as Prosser (1998) and Namaste (2000) for what they regard as a narrow medical focus that distorts the complexity of the lives and bodies of trans men and women. They are specifically concerned with the way in which medical discourse and the focus on sex reassignment surgery eclipse the social context of trans experiences. Namaste, for example, is critical of what she sees as Hausman’s overemphasis of transsexuality as a medical condition, as something that “legitimizes and consolidates a cultural equation between genitals and gender” (2000: 36). Prosser takes issue with what he sees as a stereotypical view of the transsexual subject as “medicine’s passive effect, a kind of unwitting technological product” (1998: 7). In Hausman’s formulation, the act of confession is framed as solely dependent on the power of medical practitioners, while the transsexual subject is cast as duplicitous – as someone who tries to ‘fool’ medical institutions into believing that their gender disorientation is a ‘real’ condition. Prosser argues that such “approaches to the transsexual as a constructed effect – whether figuring her or him as a pawn, victim, or dupe of medical technology – preclude a discussion of transsexual agency: that is, the subject’s capacity not only to initiate and effect his/her own somatic transition but to reform and redefine the medical narrative of transsexuality” (2008: 8).

What Prosser manages to highlight in his account is that narratives of self by trans men and women are not exclusively tied to medical discourse – they also have a social function.<sup>107</sup> As Prosser contends, transsexual narratives “attest to the valences of cultural belonging that the categories of man and woman still carry in our world” (1998: 11), and these narratives draw attention to the foundational power that the experience of “gendered realness”

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<sup>107</sup> Refer to Chapter 1 for a discussion of the medical discourses that specifically frame South African transsexual lives.

carries in society.<sup>108</sup> Confessing of ‘transness’ inevitably means that one steps into a world of discourse that plays a fundamental role in refiguring one’s gender identity; yet, as Prosser stresses, such a role is social (and not just medical), it is interactional (and not one-sided), and it is open to change and (re)negotiation. To confess and to narrate are therefore emphasised as tools that are central to both the corporeal and social manifestation of identity within a trans context – they are ways of “staking a claim” to the “realness” of trans identities (Prosser 1998: 11).

At the same time, some trans narratives of self place particular emphasis on the act of passing – of not being read as trans, but as male/a man or as female/a woman. Within such a framework, passing means “blending in” and “becoming unnoticeable” as trans, and that a subject is read by the general public as “a ‘real’ man or woman” (Cromwell 1999: 39). Not passing, or to become detectable as trans, implies that one “fails” to be “*just a man*” (ibid., my emphasis). According to this formulation, passing can be seen as a way to keep anything that is superfluous to a ‘normal’ male identity hidden from the public eye. In addition, passing is often regarded as an achievement (Gagné *et al.* 1997: 501) – of having attained the ability to be recognised as the gender of one’s experience. At the same time, not being able to pass can have serious consequences for trans individuals and can result in discrimination, harassment and assault (Namaste 2000: 144). Passing is therefore directly linked to the degree of precariousness that a trans subject might be exposed to. The ability to read someone as trans, or his/her ability to pass undetected as the gender of their experience, creates a tension with regard to the visibility of trans identities, and this friction is strongly manifested in the medium of photography.

### **3.3.3 “Look! No Don’t!”: The (Dis)Appearance of Trans Men in Photographic Autobiographies**

Several trans men have written on the tension that affects their identity exposure – a conflict that lies between their ability to pass as male, or their choice to expose their status as trans to the public. Jamison Green (2006: 501), for example, notes that a “visibility dilemma” underscores the representation of trans men. Medical and psychological discourses are specifically orientated towards making transsexual men “fit in” (ibid.), and

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<sup>108</sup> Gagné *et al.* (1997: 480-481) also present such a perspective on transsexual identities by arguing that the transsexual process of coming out essentially includes the “crossing over” of gender categories, and that “people must ‘confess’ their transsexuality in ways that adhere to medical models in order to proceed from one sex to another”. At the same time, the authors also acknowledge that the process of coming out and of transitioning is necessarily a social process, and that it forms part of a long route of identity exploration that has the “resolution” of gender identity as its goal (1997: 500).

signs of transness become invisible in direct proportion to successfully passing as the gender of one's experience in everyday society. At the same time, the objective of remaining invisible as a trans person, of being 'in stealth',<sup>109</sup> means that tremendous care has to be taken not to let any sign of one's transness slip. As Green points out "in order to be a good – or successful – transsexual person, one is not supposed to be a transsexual person at all. This puts a massive burden of secrecy on the transsexual individual: the most intimate and human aspects of our lives are constantly at risk of disclosure" (ibid.). Various transphobic social conventions and institutions reinforce this "burden of secrecy", argues Green, while the livelihoods and relationships of many trans men and women depend on maintaining the secret of their trans status.

At the same time, the rights of trans subjects to function as citizens with social and political rights are, to some extent, highly dependent on trans visibility. Openly being a trans man or woman is crucial for lobbying for trans rights and, as Green argues, "by using our own bodies and experiences as references for our standards, rather than the bodies and experiences of non-transsexuals (and non-transgender people), we can grant our own legitimacy, as have all other groups that have been oppressed because of personal characteristics" (2006: 503). Along these lines, openly presenting transness, one's status of 'being trans', seems to be important for creating a visual framework with which to contest discrimination.<sup>110</sup> Yet even in such a case ambivalence underlies trans visibility: for example, once a trans man reveals his trans(sexual) status, Green maintains, he is often examined for vestiges of femininity that could invalidate his maleness and, if none can be found, his very 'normality' renders him of little interest to the media (2006: 503, 506). This leads Green to the conclusion that the issue of trans visibility implies an impasse between simultaneous disappearance and detectability – a condition that can best be described as "Look! No don't!" (2006: 507).

A perspective of trans identities as simultaneously visible and untraceable can also be found in Prosser's (1998) discussion of autobiography and photography. Prosser is of the opinion that, as both these forms of representation are devoted to the presence of a referent, they serve the function of presenting the trans(sexual) subject as 'real'. In addition, the photograph serves as a document to trace the process of transitioning – it

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<sup>109</sup> Being 'in stealth' is a phrase used within trans communities and writings to refer to a person who wants to hide the fact that they have transitioned, and who wants to be integrated into society as the gender of their experience.

<sup>110</sup> See also Whittle (2005: 126-128) for a critical discussion of passing, and the possibilities for transgression that trans images of self can hold.

provides “concrete evidence” of how a subject grapples with, changes and adopts codes of gender (1998: 211). As Prosser maintains:

In the field of the transsexual subject the photograph functions as an incarnation; the photograph appears co-natural with the body, and may even begin as more referential of the self than the body. Inasmuch as the purpose of transsexuality is to make real the subject's true gender on the body, the visual media are highly valued, for they promise (like transition itself) to make visible that which begins as imperceptible – there but underexposed, we might say” (1998: 211).

However, this function of capturing/revealing the ‘real’ is deceptive, Prosser asserts, as a photograph can only capture a moment in the multiple exposures of gender transitioning and/or sex reassignment that a trans subject might undergo. Photographs of trans subjects lie at an intersection between revealing and concealing one's trans status as the physical process of transitioning means that the bodies of trans men, for example, are increasingly read as male as these bodies shed vestiges of their previous gender status, thus making it difficult (and sometimes even impossible) to capture ‘the’ transsexual body. According to Prosser, this tension demonstrates that “as the original body for the transsexual is that which is to be changed and left behind ... photographs of transsexuals from the past represent that which is blatantly no longer there: an absented presence” (1998: 213). This understanding of photography complicates the notion of its referential value – photographs of the trans subject before/during transitioning become incarnations of “what one is not”, thus challenging the value of such photographs as evidence (1998: 215).

Barthes's idea that photographs represent the “return of the dead” (1981: 9) is particularly powerful to Prosser, as it echoes a trans(sexual) experience of seeing one's “dead”, pre-transition self being incarnated (1998: 217). The feeling of self-recognition and self-alienation that photographs often evoke is intensified for trans men and women. For this reason, the image has to be “killed” (ibid.) – it has to be discursively framed in order to maintain the pre-transition self in its “absented presence”. In this regard, some forms of trans autobiography often draw on images to construct a narrative that, on the one hand, clearly delineates the past and the present, yet that also shows a chronological progression that starts in the past and continues into the present. In this regard, text and captions are of the utmost importance to frame the meaning of photographs – that is, to show them as a sequential narrative and to provide markers between the past and the present. For this reason, the combination of text and photography in autobiographical narratives of self

provide a way to direct the spectator's gaze when dealing with trans representations (Singer 2006: 607) – this combination provides a framework within which a sense of coherency can be narrated. At the same time, the “haunting presence” of the past as it is bodied forth in photography can be contained through text (Prosser 1998: 215, 218), as words can assuage the spectral power of the photograph, while they also create the discursive scaffold to support, contextualise and refigure the ‘evidence’ that photographs present.

This relationship between the present and absent self in photographs of trans men is illustrated by two different approaches to the subject of autobiography – the one is Kotula's compilation of autobiographic narratives in *The Phallus Palace* (2002), and the other is Morgan, Marais and Wellbeloved's book *Trans* (2009). The former is an American publication that specifically deals with narratives of transitioning, and that draws on the perspective of nineteen trans men whose photographic portraits accompany the text. The latter is a South African publication that presents twenty-eight trans autobiographical narratives, of which nine are specifically the perspectives of trans men. Both these compilations use photographs that were taken by members of their respective trans communities. The texts of these autobiographical compilations also mirror one another insofar as they use images to present a visual reference of sorts, while both these books predominantly focus on the subjects' personal backgrounds, the series of events that led to them realising their trans status, the process of transitioning, and their present status as male subjects within larger society.

A difference can, however, be seen in the use of photographs in these compilations. In *The Phallus Palace* photographs of both a pre-transition/transitioning as well as a present/post-transition subject are included. The differences between these dual images are emphasised by their placement in the book, with the present image following on its predecessor, thus providing a visual sign of a subject's progress from his previous to his present forms of (gender) identification. In addition, the pre-transition images are printed much smaller when compared to their post-transition counterparts, with the former being thumbnail images while the latter fill an entire page. In terms of placement and scale, a narrative of change, and of changing for the good, is constructed by means of photography. Even in cases where the images of the past and present self look almost exactly the same (and may, in some cases, even be a matter of the subject just assuming a different pose), the difference in scale and placement still provide an overarching narrative of change. The format and placement of the photographs, as well the

accompanying text, serve to create a distance between what Prosser calls the “present” and “absent” self – the photographs and text direct the spectator’s/reader’s gaze towards the masculinity of the present-day subject, while it draws on the past for charting the degree of change that the subject has undergone. At the same time, the past remains framed in a certain way – the haunting presence of the pre-transition self is kept in place and minimised by placing it within a narrative framework and presenting it in a specific manner. Both text and photographs thus serve to draw on, but also to ‘reduce in scale’, the presence of the previous self.

While *The Phallus Palace* shows both the present and absent self, *Trans* shows only images of the post-transition subject. Photographs of the present-day subject also occupy a full page and, as in *The Phallus Palace*, they show the subjects as they pose in ‘everyday’ settings – canoeing down a river, working in the kitchen, lying in bed, or riding on a motorcycle are some of the themes that are visualised in the photographs. The images act as referents for the trans men through which they trace the fulfilment of their gender transitioning and their role as social citizens – these images serve as visual monuments that testify to the resolution of gender identity. In the case of *Trans*, this idea of resolution is specifically emphasised by the absence of the past self. The past self is omitted in the photographic narrative, and while the text hints at the presence of a pre-transition self, the photographs serve to solidify the subjects as they presently see and present themselves. While *The Phallus Palace* uses photographs to construct a narrative of progress, and to show trans men as they are shaped by a process of gender transition, *Trans* rather chooses to emphasise the product of gender transitioning. Instead of drawing attention to the dichotomy of the present/absent self, *Trans* highlights only the present self – it opts for emphasising the trans man as someone who *is*, rather than someone who has *become*, or who has left a gender or another version of self behind. Yet, even though these images of the absent self are not included, their existence is still alluded to by the very naming of the subjects as trans – one reads the post-transition images as emanations of a past self and, even though the absent self remains invisible, the act of trans disclosure makes it imaginable.

These books are examples of two different approaches to the subject of trans visibility. They reveal, on the one hand, how photography can be used to solidify a certain version of self. At the same time, they show how acts of disclosure form part of a process of identity exposure through which transness and/or masculinity is reiterated. Furthermore, the discourse of disclosure often presupposes that a singular identity would be disclosed

and that this act would entail the subject ultimately (and finally) verbalising and visualising the self, thus overlooking the range of identities that might be revealed (through images or texts, for example). Even though multiple identities are performed through a range of disclosures and silences, the identities of trans men and women are often reduced to binaries of disclosed/concealed, visible/invisible, present/absent, and public/private.

By pitting the secrecy of passing against the disclosure of 'coming out' as trans, the identities of trans men and women are discursively constructed as necessarily visible and knowable – an idea that is undermined by the actual fact that the successful gender transitioning of a trans subject largely renders their transness invisible. At the same time, emphasis on trans visibility may present a positive move towards lobbying for the equality and freedom of trans people; yet the notion of 'progress', of a move from concealment to open celebration, can in effect give rise to a teleological conception of full public disclosure that ignores the complexities of trans lives, and the extreme conditions of precarity that they are often subjected to.

The emphasis that is placed on trans visibility is especially relevant to the genre of autobiography, where the act of participation, of presenting one's images/story, falls within a rhetoric of defying secrecy and invisibility through public disclosure. However, as these two books demonstrate, and as my discussion of the photographic archives of the three research participants in next chapter reveals, simultaneous processes of disclosure and concealment define the identities of these trans men, with both the present and absent self playing a central role in their visualisation of their identities. Photography may be vital for renegotiating and even stabilising a sense of self, yet its capacity for providing a final, singular version, a comprehensive archive of the human subject, is undercut by competing and omitted versions that lie at the edge of frames of representation.

### **3.4 CONCLUSION**

Systems of human mnemonic recollection and the medium of photography have become so enmeshed with one another that photography not only serves the function of helping the human subject to remember, but the medium has become crucial for providing the scene where recollection commences. This is particularly true of the medium's employment in modes of autobiographic recollection, where photography and text are often endowed with the power to remember and sustain a certain notion of self. Despite the degree to which such a conception has been drawn into disrepute, it still exerts a powerful influence over contemporary conceptions of subjectivity, and it is to a large degree relevant to the

personal archives that I investigate in this thesis. Photography, in particular, is an important medium for the recollection, reiteration and sharing of identity, and it provides valuable information about how human subjects remember, and what they consider memorable. In the words of Christa Wolf, “writing means making things large” (1970: 168). This idea can perhaps also be applied to photography as its capacity for enlargement (for amplification, for restating and overstating) is central to its development in Western society. But then again, to write and to photograph can also be a means of making things small – of trying to control and limit their impact, make them seem ordinary, or even make them disappear. The next chapter provides the testing site for such ideas as it draws on the example of personal photographic archives as spaces where discourses on visibility and invisibility intersect.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **ENCIRCLING THREE ARCHIVES**

To propose, to proceed and to grasp (at) – this chapter suggests a way of moving towards and moving within the personal photographic archives of Robert, Munir and Charl – the three trans men who participated in this study. This proposed way of approaching these archives is mediated by a complex relationship between these men (as subjects of this study and archivists of these photographic collections) and an outside viewer or public gaze, as varying degrees of disclosure underline the exchange of information within such a relationship. A basic premise of this study is that archives are spaces where knowledge is manifested in levels, especially as they do not constitute a site where all is rendered knowable to an audience, or where knowledge is necessarily safeguarded, but their existence is marked (and, in fact, facilitated) by the gaps, omissions and fabrications that are always part of a project of recollection. The previous two chapters provided the discursive basis for this hypothesis, as they identified key theoretical frameworks for thinking about photographic archives as sites where the reiterative dimension of both photography and gender identity impacts on the way in which modes of authorship and recollection are conceived. While the two preceding chapters proposed an understanding of archival discourses as complex, especially as these discourses relate to the notion of recollecting identity via photography and narrative, this chapter serves as a platform for trying out and grappling with such theories on the basis of three personal photographic archives.

These archives, as they are examined in this thesis, were conceived out of discussions with the participants regarding the visibility of their identities as trans men. At the outset, I explained that my research was concerned with the way in which they used photography to negotiate and reflect on their identities as trans men. I also explained that I was interested in the way in which they used these photographs to construct personal photographic archives of their own making. During a series of interviews that were conducted over a period of two years, the participants used narrative accounts to give a sense of their relationship to the medium of photography. During this time the participants also identified and discussed specific images that they regarded as important for understanding this relationship – some of which they chose to include in this thesis, while others were only discussed and deliberately omitted. This range of responses to the notion of photographic archiving found its manifestation in the degree of visibility the

participants afforded certain photographs – while some images were shown and discussed in depth, others were only alluded to and never disclosed.<sup>111</sup>

My original intention with this project was to do a close reading of the images that the participants allowed me to show to the reader in order to suggest possible ways of interpreting these images and, maybe, to reach a better understanding the lives of local trans men. Armed with the purpose of disclosing something ‘for the better’, I set about my task of trying to ascertain and explain those photographs that the participants were most willing to share. As this project progressed, the idea of proffering and analysing some photographic evidence of the lives of the three participants seemed to lose its significance, perhaps because I became less confident in my own ability to grasp and speak of their lives, but also because the very complexity of their accounts of self started to undermine the clarity that I longed for in my own thesis/archive. The need to reorientate this project pointed towards a shift in authorship as the notion of presenting an autonomous voice/archive became less feasible as my contact with the participants progressed. One of the most important developments in this regard was the decision to give the participants the opportunity to read and comment on my own interpretation of their archives (their comments are incorporated into the last section of this chapter), thus allowing them to show where they differ from or agree with my own method of authorship/archivisation. This signals a crucial change in the point of departure of this thesis, and in particular of this chapter, as it is concerned less with my own reading of the participants’ archives than with showing how a process of collaboration and dialogue was instrumental in the way they and I conceived their personal archives.

Such a conversation on their archives also called for a different approach to forms of photographic recollection, as this highlighted the importance of considering both the visible and invisible aspects of these participants’ lives. The complex way in which a state of (in)visibility manifests in these archives is echoed in the research methodology that is used in this study. It is important to note that this study is not an empirical analysis of trans men that can be generalised, be it on an international or even a local level, neither is it a

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<sup>111</sup> During my discussion of the participants’ photographic collections within this chapter, I will make reference to specific interviews and images, and indicate under which addenda they can be found. Robert’s interviews and images are collected under Addendum A, Munir’s collection under Addendum B, and Charl’s collection under Addendum C. The photographs and narrated (or censored) images are numbered according to the order in which each participant presented them to me. The name of the author and/or archivist of each image is referenced in the image captions (preference is given to the archivist, and not necessarily to the photographer). The images are mostly untitled, except where the participants specifically used titles when they presented the images to me. My decision to include the narrated images in this numbering system is based on the way in which the visual properties of these photographs, although invisible to the readers of this dissertation, are of central importance within my discussion of the participants’ archives.

semiotic analysis of photography; it is rather concerned with the particular manner in which the three chosen participants conceive, use and talk about their photographic archives to give some account of self, be it as trans men or even, more broadly, as human subjects. While I highlight certain similarities that exist in their accounts of this relationship, these points of connection should not be read as an attempt to consolidate a theory for trans archives/lives, but rather as a means of showing how discourses on identity may intersect on an archival level. By underscoring the narrative nature of this study, I wish to highlight that this chapter is not concerned with providing a decisive conclusion on the participants' archives, nor for my own archive/thesis, but rather with facilitating a space where these archives can intersect with and respond to one another.

In order to account for such interaction, and to show how it impacted on Charl, Robert and Munir's narrative response to forms of photographic recollection, this chapter traces a changing line of visibility that is manifested in these participants' personal archives. To my mind, the best way to describe the manifestation of their archives would be to draw on the image of a circle that starts at a point of invisibility, that moves to a node of visibility, and then moves back again to a position of invisibility. This cycle is mirrored in the structure of this chapter as I start by considering photographs that were described as "important" or "powerful" by the participants during the interviews, yet rendered invisible as the participants chose not to include these images in the thesis (Chapter 4.1). These invisible images constitute a threshold of sorts, a place where discourses on empowerment and disempowerment intersect, and this section draws on the use of photography within the research participants' identity documents as an example of these invisible archives. From this discussion, I move to those photographs that were highlighted by the participants for their ability to disclose their identities, and that were chosen to be included in this thesis (Chapter 4.2). This section on visible archives was initiated by a question that I posed to the participants, namely: if they were to consider their own photographic collections as personal archives, which five images would they choose to discuss and share as markers of their identity.<sup>112</sup> Lastly, this chapter travels back to reflect on images that were specifically discussed with the idea that they would not, or cannot be made visible (Chapter 4.3). This section consists of narrated/invisible images that were deliberately not shown or included for reproduction because of their potential to render these participants' lives precarious. Through modes of narrative recollection, the participants attempted to assuage the reiterative dimension of these censored images by translating them into text, and this

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<sup>112</sup> This delineation was born out of the divergence in the number of images that the participants presented to me – while one of the participants presented more than two hundred images (and had access to many more), another participant had only a few photographs to choose from. I revisit this delineation and its impact on the study later in this chapter.

section considers the possible impact of such forms of translation on the participants' roles as archivists, authors and photographers. Photography's proclivity towards enunciating and replicating a certain idea of self is thus granted varying degrees of credence and exposure by the participants, and this chapter picks up on these nuances by tracing a cycle of self-representation that moves along an axis of visibility.

Within the larger cycle of invisibility/visibility/invisibility that shapes this chapter, each subchapter is internally imprinted by cycles of its own sort. Four key themes are reiterated within each of the subchapters, and they provide a structure for moving within and establishing points of connection between Chapters 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3. All the subchapters start with a brief explanation of the process that informed the creation of the participants' individual archives. From this basis I investigate each mode by, firstly, accounting for the roles of archivist and author that emerged during the process of recollection. Secondly, I examine the particular relationship that is facilitated between photography and subjectivity. This relationship also has tremendous bearing on the visualisation of masculinity, and the third theme is concerned with how the three trans men facilitate their (in)visibility through photography and narrative. The fourth thread brings all these queries together by considering the photographic archive's role in framing these participants' lives as precarious. These themes form a continuous line of enquiry and they provide outlines that, through their repetition in each subchapter, allow the readers themselves to navigate within the personal archives of Robert, Munir and Charl. These delineations and repetitions also reflect my own provisional, tentative, and perhaps even cautious attempt at grasping these archives – of creating places to which I can return when I find myself lost.

#### 4.1 ARCHIVING (AT) AN INVISIBLE THRESHOLD

As a point of entry into different spaces, a threshold facilitates the meeting and intersection of things that cannot necessarily be integrated or reduced to one another. While a threshold functions as a sign that some system of delineation is at play, it also provides the possibility for forms of interchange between the categories that it identifies. With such a dual role in mind, this section is concerned with forms of archiving that are specifically geared towards bridging and/or demarcating various realms, including the private and the public, the legal and the prohibited, and, importantly, the visible and the invisible. As an example of how these thresholds are manifested in the personal archives of the three research participants, I draw on their interpretation of the role that identity documents play in facilitating the (in)visibility of their social, political and/or personal identities. These documents proved to be central, but also peripheral to the construction of the three personal archives, particularly as these documents' supposed ability to visualise and monitor identity is strongly slanted towards, but in some respects also at odds with, an archival understanding of recollection.

During my interviews with the research participants, questions on personal identity led to a divergent array of responses, particularly with regards to the importance of images in constructing and negotiating their personal and/or social identities. Despite the multiplicity that marks the visualisation of their identities and their responses to visual media in general, all the participants invest tremendous meaning and power in their identity documents, particularly their ID books,<sup>113</sup> as markers of their identity. They all cite these books as some of the most important visual documents that they have in their possession, both as South African citizens and particularly as trans men. Our conversations about their ID books were initiated for different reasons – for one of the participants it started with a discussion of how he changed his name, for another the issue of resolving his identity led to a discussion of his identity documents, while another participant linked his feelings about

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<sup>113</sup> All South African citizens and permanent residents who are sixteen years and older are required to have in their possession an identity document, or ID book. The South African government places particular emphasis on this document as it not only “proves” the identity of its bearer, but it also provides a legal imprint of this identity “when dealing with private and public institutions” (*Department of Home Affairs, Republic of South Africa* 2011 [Online]). Although carrying an ID book is not required in daily life, a citizen can be requested to show this document when dealing with certain institutions – for example, when interacting with most government agencies, including applying for a passport or driver's licence, registering to vote, or applying for social grants and healthcare services; for access to housing and education; and for signing contracts, such as opening or closing a bank account, or entering into business agreements (*Department of Home Affairs, Republic of South Africa* 2011 [Online]). Applying for an ID book requires a citizen to furnish evidence (such as a birth certificate and photographs), fill out a form, and have his/her fingerprints taken at a local Department of Home Affairs office, after which such applications are sent for authorisation at the Department's head office. Once the information has been approved and archived, an ID book is issued.

photography as a visualising medium to his ID book. Despite the divergent points of entry into our discussion of their identity documents, all the participants emphasised the value of such documents, both during and after their transition.<sup>114</sup>

Another similarity between the participants' discussion of their ID book is the way in which it was presented to me – all the participants chose to discuss the documents and one of the participants showed his ID photograph to me, yet none of them chose to have their ID photographs shown in this thesis and thus, by implication, to have them disclosed to the reader. There are various reasons why they could have chosen not to disclose the photographs in their ID books – reasons that I address throughout this subchapter. However, it is interesting to note that they all made overt reference to their ID books as significant *visual* documents. When asked to choose five images that they consider to be important markers of their identity (a question that framed the visible archives that they created), Robert and Charl chose not to include the photographs in their ID books despite their emphasis on its value as a significant and powerful tool for constructing their identities. Munir chose to include his ID photograph under his five-image selection, yet this image is only discussed and never shown – it remains a narrated image.

When I started writing this chapter, the absence of Charl's and Robert's ID photographs within the visible photographic collections was a cause of concern – I thought that it was something that may have slipped my attention while the interviews were taking place. Perhaps I was not attentive or persistent enough to have picked up on the way in which these images eluded my gaze and my grasp, or perhaps I was so entranced by Charl's and Robert's narratives that I forgot about the visual dimension of my research. Here, I thought, was a gap in my research that pointed towards my failure as archivist. But then, as I started tracing my steps through the transcribed interviews and as I subsequently talked to the participants, I realised that the omission of these images can be ascribed to various factors, and that a demand *to see* or *to have* did not fit into this research project (I was, after all, never trying to archive or to show everything).<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> It is important to note that my own questions might have framed their responses to their identity documents in a certain way, and I do not wish to portray their discussion of these documents as unprompted or one-sided in any way. During the interviews the types of questions that I asked inevitably played a role in how the participants responded to notions of the documentation and visualisation of their identities, and I acknowledge that their responses were inevitably framed by the very discourses that I brought to our discussions.

<sup>115</sup> This is a moment to which I return again later – one that haunts the structure and interpretation of this thesis.

In order to address the complex issues that underscore the invisibility of these images, I start by introducing the three participants' different interpretations of their ID books. From these interpretations I extend my analysis by drawing on the four themes that frame my discussion of these personal archives, namely the participants' roles as archivists and authors, their relationship to photography as visualising medium, the impact of discourses on transness and masculinity on their response to these documents, and the possible condition of socio-political vulnerability and/or empowerment that these documents underscore.

During my interview with Robert, a question about his current name led to a discussion of his ID book. For Robert, his ID book "is everything" when it comes to legitimising a personal identity (Personal Interview).<sup>116</sup> The significance of this document is stressed by Robert for various reasons. Firstly, it is seen as a way to initiate a change of gender – for Robert, the process of transitioning is started by "fixing" the ID document and not necessarily with sex reassignment surgery. As Robert argues:

You can forget about changing your body, but you have to change your ID document. So when I work with trans-people I always tell them "what, you want to have operations? We first have to fix your ID". *It is the most powerful thing, not an operation.* It is a rite of passage, it makes you a citizen. (ibid., my emphasis)<sup>117</sup>

Secondly, the ID document is emphasised for its power to aid a subject during the process of gender transitioning. For Robert, the state of "presenting" as ambivalent, and the "trouble" and "embarrassment" that such ambivalence can cause within the public domain, necessitates the possession of an ID book that corresponds to the gender of one's experience (ibid.). While the process of transitioning can be initiated by a change of name in one's identity documents, a subsequent change of one's ID number and photograph is also needed in order to possess and present a document that is, in Robert's words, "fixed" (ibid.). Obtaining such a "fixed" document is crucial, Robert maintains, for providing a source of authority from which to initiate and live the gender of one's experience. It provides evidence of that which is "right" (ibid.), and, by implication, that which is trustworthy and legal, and thus citable from this document of authority. As Robert's

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<sup>116</sup> See Addendum A for a transcript of this interview.

<sup>117</sup> In his feedback on the thesis, Robert wrote the following in the margin of his printed copy in response to this quote: "Please mention my rebellious feelings and disrespect for the flimsiness of this notion. I laugh at society and its *papiertjies* [pieces of paper]" (Personal Feedback). Although Robert did not disagree with my interpretation of his ID, and he did not want to change his earlier comments on this document, he did feel that, in retrospect, the seriousness with which he views this document is perhaps something that is expected of him rather than his own impression.

interpretation of his ID book reveals, it can be a document through which one can speak/visualise/authorise one's identity and that can, as it were, stand in for one. It seems to be both a starting point for identity reconstruction, as well as the actual basis (or formula) that determines how these constructions are to be understood within an official framework – how these constructions can be initiated, known, categorised, legalised and resolved.

In much the same way as Robert, the two other research participants also emphasise the need to “fix” one's ID book so as to gain a sense of legitimacy. For Munir, his ID book may be one of the most important visual documents that he *could* have, but, until this book is “not resolved”, he does not really benefit from its power (Personal Interview).<sup>118</sup> Munir goes as far as saying that, with his ID book still reflecting his pre-transition self “I feel 70% complete, and once I get my new ID book with my new gender status printed in there, I would feel 100% complete” (ibid.). The photograph that appears in his ID-book is seen as one of the most important images for creating a “completed” identity (ibid.). As evidence of such an identity, Munir's ID book seems to be considered as useful for creating a coherent sense of self and for presenting this self as lawful within the public arena.

However, the ID book is not always a document of empowerment and, in the case of Munir, the fact that he does not have an ID book that corresponds to his current gender identity is repeatedly emphasised for putting him in “difficult” situations – situations that lead to “confusion” and “awkwardness” in public settings (ibid.). The possession of a ‘wrong’ ID-book<sup>119</sup> can have a profoundly disempowering effect and, as Munir's discussion reveals, it can lead to misrecognition and vulnerability. Such situations and places are centred on the public sphere where access to services, employment and care is maintained on the condition of having a ‘correct’ ID book. Having a ‘wrong’ ID book places Munir in situations where he experiences a sense of vulnerability as he is forced to disclose and account for his status as a trans(itioning) subject.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> See Addendum B for a transcript of this interview.

<sup>119</sup> That is, a book that still describes and/or visualises a pre-transition gender identity even though a subject is in the process of transitioning or has already transitioned. In the context of this study a ‘correct’ ID book would be an identity document that corresponds to the desired and/or post-transition gender identity of the subject.

<sup>120</sup> This particular image also forms part of Munir's choice of a narrated image, and I return to it in Chapter 4.3 as its significance as a visually censored photograph is important in the context of this study.



Charl also bears intimate knowledge of the hardship one faces in having the ‘wrong’ ID book. After having his name changed, Charl had to wait longer than twenty years to have his gender status changed in this document. This meant that his ID book was caught in a state of ambivalence – while it bore his male-identified name and a photograph in which he presented as male, his gender status was still reflected as female in his ID number. The photograph that appeared in his ID book during this period played a significant role and, even though Charl is generally sceptical about (or even distrustful of) the power of photographs, he stresses the importance of this particular image. As Charl argues, “of all the photographs that I ever had, of all those photographs the one I would choose to really identify with is the ID photograph” (Personal Interview).<sup>121</sup> According to Charl, the power of the photograph in his identity document is profound as it has the capacity to override or camouflage some of the textual information. Of particular importance is the capacity of this photograph to show him as male to a viewer who is unaware of his trans status. As Charl argues, the photograph in the ID book creates a space to which one can direct the viewer by saying “do you see here” (ibid.) – an ability that proved to be particularly useful when he still had his ‘old’ ID book in which the gender markers (such as his ID number) identified him as female. In this case, the photograph’s power to corroborate his masculinity is very important and, as Charl notes, it was only with close scrutiny that his trans status is revealed to a viewer of his old document.<sup>122</sup> This explanation draws attention to the power of the photograph in the ID book to override other (textual) information – the photograph becomes a shorthand for gender status in the format of this document as it is seemingly read as one of the most ‘obvious’ signs of a gender identity. It is, however, only with his current identity document where his photograph, name and number corresponds to his experienced gender identity, that his status as a man (instead of a trans person) is consistently read as such and officially reiterated in the public arena.

#### 4.1.1 On Archivisation and Authorship

The participants’ interpretations of their identity documents place particular emphasis on the symbolic value of these visual documents. These documents seem to exert tremendous weight as record-keeping devices that provide the material from which narratives of self can be constructed, while they also determine what material is needed to actually ‘know’ their bearer. As mnemonic devices that seemingly aid in the recollection of identity, they

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<sup>121</sup> See Addendum C for a transcript of this interview.

<sup>122</sup> Charl uses the example of going to the bank where the ID book is usually inspected for inconsistencies (or signs of its possible ‘incorrectness’) in much more detail than in other places.

render a subject and certain aspects of his/her past detectable, or archivable. If such an understanding of the archive is brought into play when investigating identity documents, various discourses are illuminated as they create intricate webs of power between the research participants, the state and wider society. If read along these lines, the ID book provides a means for exploring the way in which the three participants negotiated their role as archivists and authors within a wider arena where various other (social and state) institutions already play a predominant role in determining how these participants can be authorised and recollected.

Derrida's conception of the archive is particularly helpful when investigating identity documents, not only for the way in which they fit into certain archival structures, but also for the archives that they constitute in themselves. For Derrida, the archive exercises its authority directly at a threshold – at the intersection between its topological and nomological functions. It is at this intersection where the archive authorises its own existence, where it “imposes and supposes a bundle of limits which have a history” (1995: 4). This function of cordoning off information is also central to imagining the archive as a single corpus – that is, as an autonomous, law-entrenched space that is both institutive and conservative. Derrida's analysis of the archive as an authoritative space resonates with the practice and concept of creating identity documents, with the South African ID book being a prime example of such forms of documentation. I would argue that this book can be seen as a severely disciplined form of archive, as it constitutes a space where information is intentionally collected as evidence. This document is imbued with power as various regulatory discourses underpin its system of recollection. In addition, this document is required to gain access to various institutions and services, and it is therefore linked to issues of empowerment and entitlement. In the South African context it enjoys tremendous privilege as a document that officially recognises a subject as a citizen, while it also has a bearing on the conditions for such forms of recognition to take place.

Identity documents also play a definitive role within the larger (global) context, as they are central to the functioning of the modern democratic state. As John Torpey (1999: 165) argues, identity documents enhance the state's control of, and ability to discriminate between, its subjects in terms of rights and privileges. The existence of these documents rests on the “requirement that all persons be in a position to identify themselves to the authorities when the latter *demand* that they do so” (ibid., my emphasis).<sup>123</sup> These qualities of exigency are also reflected in the South African context, where identity documents have

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<sup>123</sup> See also Craig Robertson (2005) and Matt Matsuda (1996) on identity papers and modes of state recollection.

a loaded political history as they were intricately tied to the enforcement of apartheid ideologies. As Paul Edwards and Gabrielle Hecht (2010: 625) argue, “the pillars of apartheid were the compulsory documentary order, biometric identifiers ... [and] the baroque taxonomy of racial identity”, all of which found their expression either directly in identity documents, or in the archives from which these documents drew their information and power. One pertinent example is the infamous ‘pass book’ system that was enforced in apartheid South Africa to monitor and control the movement of the local black population. South African identity documents are thus laden with histories of restriction and segregation and, even though they might represent a degree of power for some citizens, they also serve as symbolic reminders of other people’s dispossession and powerlessness in the face of state oppression.

The South African ID book therefore underscores a specific relationship that prevails between a subject and systems of power. The very fact that it is unlawful to reproduce or change an ID book without the state’s knowledge shows the degree to which the state’s official recognition (or knowledge) of a given subject’s identity holds sway within local society. The ID book can thus be seen as a particular kind of archive that is protected from unlawful human interference by certain conventions and institutions. It exerts its bureaucratic authority by determining which archival custodians (or institutions) are in charge of the collection of information, and which archival signatures (languages, conventions and/or apparatuses) are needed to make this document recognisable before the law. This document is regulated and produced by state-sanctioned institutions who are entrusted with the jurisdiction of interpreting and determining ‘facts’, or, to use Derrida’s words, of “speaking the law” (1995: 2). In addition, the ID book is granted authority as an official document by drawing on specific archival signatures that have come to be expected of it – for example, it uses and reiterates certain formal elements (such as size, lettering, the use of photography, watermarks, barcodes, etc.) in order to be read as ‘real’, while it also stresses the distinctiveness of certain features (the *specific* numbers, names and photographs) in order to be read as ‘individual’.

The ID book can also be regarded as an archive of the human subject that somehow exists beyond the grasp of the subject that it contains. In the context of my study this is illustrated by the fact that participants cannot merely change their idea or recollection of themselves in this archive, but they have to appeal and yield to state-sanctioned archons that preside over this document. The ID book is an archive that exists beyond their immediate control and, even though they might appeal to the authorities to change some information within it,

they do not have the power to change its systems of classification. This archive is therefore never completely within their power – it is something that they can have in their possession, but that they cannot own in its entirety.

While this document may exist beyond the full control of these participants, the particular identity that it represents can also evade their complete command. This feature was repeatedly emphasised by Robert, Munir and Charl as they all experienced that, at some time or other, their ID books did not bear full (or correct) testimony to their identities, in particular their gender identities. As their experiences show, the ID book does not provide a ‘true’ or timeless mirror of the identity that it supposedly captures, but it provides only a partial, provisional account. It illustrates how human life is envisioned and anticipated by the state and society, and it provides the categories and format for human subjects to imagine their lives in accordance with an official schema. As these documents are often created for/by the human subject at a young age – at a time when they are still largely under the control of their parents or guardians – the identity that emerges in this archive comprises various interpretations of how the subject should be read and recollected.<sup>124</sup> There are various stakeholders in the identity that is created in this archive and, unless the subject makes a concerted effort to change the information contained in this document (as Robert and Charl have done, and as Munir is in the process of doing), their representation of self remains embedded in a vision in which various other parties play a major role. In a Derridean context, one can argue that this feature of the ID book is a good example of how the archive is directed towards the future anterior – to the future-to-come. This document anticipates and imagines how its bearer will identify and continue to identify in the future, while it also provides a structure that informs its bearer how (and by which frames) to imagine ‘his’/‘her’ own life. It is built on the premise that, if a life is archived in a certain way, it will be lived accordingly. This idea was strongly pronounced in Robert’s conception of the role of his ID book as he specifically highlights its power as a means to initiate a gender transition. By emphasising the ID book as “the most powerful thing, not an operation” (Personal Interview), Robert frames this document as a place of commencement, as an archive that has discursive *and material* consequences. By inciting discourse (and,

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<sup>124</sup> Such knowledge plays a large role in determining the identity of a subject as it is reflected in an ID book, particularly as the birth certificate is seen as one of the most important supporting documents when applying for an ID book. Unless a subject changes his/her ID book at a later stage of their lives, this document will contain some information that was determined by his/her parents or legal guardians, and that was reiterated in various forms from birth onwards.

importantly, a particular discourse of authority), a change in gender can officially be brought about.<sup>125</sup>

Moreover, the research participants' explanation of the function of their ID books also demonstrates how these documents demand of them to comply with certain rules when entering official institutions or discourses. One such way in which these participants are captured or framed is in the gendered categories that the ID book adheres to – this document archives them in a gendered way and, unless they appeal to the authorities (or archons) to have their gender description changed, its gender classification reflects the biological sex of these subjects as determined at birth. They can thus change the archival content of their identity document, but they cannot change the archival categories (the 'he' and 'she') itself. Gender is inscribed in the state's knowledge of the human subject and, as these participants' accounts demonstrate, to be recognised one must comply with one or other gender category. Not being gendered, or being gendered differently, does not fit into this archival structure. As the ID book therefore seems to suggest, one has to be gendered to be known.

Despite its appearance of containing its subject within a strongly delineated and restricted archive, the ID book rather exists as a space where discourses of power and knowledge meet and cross. This document can be seen as a material social practice that upholds a range of relationships – be it between a subject and his/her (changing) conception of self, between a subject and society, or between a subject and the state. In addition, the ID book also bridges the realms of the personal and the public as it allows for the state's knowledge of its subjects to be made visible and documentable – it asks its subjects *to identify* and thus to be identifiable, and it administers the transition of this identity from the personal (or private) to the public and social realms. At the same time, the constitution of this archive, which is determined by that which it deems worthy of knowing and visualising, comes at the cost of that which remains invisible and unknowable, or that which it forgets.<sup>126</sup> Its power of delineation is always under threat by that which it does not include

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<sup>125</sup> This does not imply that a change of gender is entirely dependent on the discourses of identity as they are determined by the state, but it does imply that these discourses (and the documents that carry them) officiate a certain idea of gender, and, to have one's gender identity authorised by the state (and also recognised in society) cannot occur without complying with such discourses.

<sup>126</sup> The ID book's ability to 'forget' a past has important implications for the participants of this study, particularly as it relates to their ability to pass as male in everyday society – this is an issue that I return to later in this chapter, when I specifically deal with the way in which the ID book frames these participants as 'trans' and/or 'male'.

or cannot comprehend (of outside information, so to speak), and the subject it tries to capture always exceeds the frame that it provides.

The ID book's 'failure' to comprehend 'completely' made me think of my own relationship with this document – of how I, as a cisgender person, have never really been troubled by its gendered framing devices. I don't imagine this document to give a full account of my identity and my body (its partiality and distortion are particularly conspicuous in a now-dated photograph that shows me as a teenager), yet I have never really felt that it represents an idea of my identity that is completely at odds with how the state or society sees me. While I have never assumed that it can be completely accurate, I have also never imagined it as a document that can actually be wrong. Most importantly, as a cisgendered person, I have never felt at risk of being rendered unrecognisable because of some fundamental slippage of information between the document and my gender identity. In all, this document has become almost invisible to me, one that I use, but that I rarely look at or think about. In contrast, Robert, Munir and Charl know how difficult this document can be – how it doesn't always *work* as an archive – and for them issues around its 'correctness' and 'visibility' are crucial for functioning in everyday society. The limitations of this archive are not merely an issue of vanity or annoyance (as they are for me, and possibly for many cisgender people), but for these participants it actually highlights their non-compliance in such a way that they can be rendered vulnerable.

#### **4.1.2 On Photography and Subjectivity**

The way in which an archive frames a subject and renders a subject recognisable is, in some respects, strongly influenced by discourses on visibility. In the case of the ID book, this is apparent in the considerable authority that this document seems to exert in the lives of the participants as a device of verification as much of its power hangs on its capacity to render identity visible and readable. The use of photography as a medium for suggesting identity is of particular significance in this document. While the ID book as a whole is invested with the idea that it can provide empirical evidence of the existence of an identity, photography plays an important role in imagining this identity as stable, legal and visualisable, and thus recognisable. Photography's capacity to bear a visual likeness of a subject resonates with the ID book's positivist preoccupation with providing some form of 'evidence', and the medium of photography is pivotal to the research participants' interpretation of this document as site of recollection.

The use of photography in the ID book is strongly orientated towards a referential understanding of the medium. The photograph's appearance of recollecting the human subject it captures is well suited to a larger archival project of rendering the individual identifiable; that is, of calling the human subject into being as a state-sanctioned entity. This notion highlights the fact that much credence is still invested in the power of the photograph to provide a 'faithful' copy of reality (particularly on the part of the state), and Barthes's conception of the photograph as a "certificate of presence" (1981: 87) strongly resonates in this medium's utilisation in the ID book as a means to access and survey the human subject.<sup>127</sup> The ID book's apparent disposition to bearing evidence of the 'real' may be facilitated by the inclusion of photography, yet this medium does not exert its power independently, but at the meeting point of image and text. This book is a prime example of how text and photography work in conjunction with one another in order to produce a seemingly stable archive<sup>128</sup> – one that is (in its ideal form) recognised as 'correct' by the state, by the public and by oneself. As revealed by the accounts of Robert, Charl and Munir, the convergence and coordination of different bodies of (photographic and textual) knowledge is extremely important as the degree to which their identities are rendered intelligible within the public arena rests on their ability to create a seamless archive – one that is not to be faulted for any (trans) 'inconsistencies'. It is a place where various knowledges about a human subject – be it in the form of a name, number or photograph – have to work together and correspond and, for the research participants, it therefore charts a process of bringing discourse and image into alignment with the body and its public appearance.

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<sup>127</sup> The emphasis that is placed on the referential value of the photograph is largely orientated towards an older, more traditional conception of analogue photographs as documents of truth. In the South African context, most ID photographs, however, are taken by a digital camera and then printed on photographic paper. While the general opinion of digital photography might be sceptical of its truthfulness (see Chapter 3.1.2. for a discussion of the distrust in the medium), it still seems to be considered as credible enough to serve as an official certificate of identity in the ID book. Certain specifications are in place in order to 'ensure' the credibility of the ID photograph, some of them being that these photographs should not be more than one month old, that they should be printed on "high-quality" photo paper, that they should show the subject's "natural colour", that they should be taken against a "light grey or plain cream-coloured background", and that they should show the subject alone with "no chair backs, toys, or other people visible", amongst other criteria (*Department of Home Affairs, Republic of South Africa*. n.d. [Online]). These formulations give the impression that the subject can almost be lifted from the surface as they 'really' exist, and that the subjects can also be separated from the world around them in order to exist as isolated entities – as individuals cut free from the everyday world and who now enter the domain of discourse and officialdom.

<sup>128</sup> It is, perhaps, also this particular combination of text and image that played a large role in the invisibility of these archives – because a photograph always appears in combination with text in an ID book, such images may be considered as part of a document and not images in their own right. While I placed specific emphasis on visual images that the participants might include in their selection for Chapter 4.2, these documents occupy a complex position in which text and image cannot be imagined as separate entities.

A methodology of bringing bodies of knowledge into line also gives rise to a specific notion regarding self-authorship. For the research participants, the ID book represents an idea of self that is strongly slanted towards the autobiographical, perhaps more so for them than for a cisgender audience. Their ability to *change* information, instead of accepting the information ascribed to them, seems to suggest to these participants that they have the ability to draw on specific autobiographical tools in order to emerge as identifiable human beings. This notion is extremely important as these men place much credence on their ability to choose how their identity is narrated/visualised in their ID books. The idea of authorship that emerges in these documents thus seems to be predicated on proposing an idea of self through an act of revision.

To authorise oneself 'on one's own' in this document is, however, a challenging if not impossible task, as the various voices that form this archive cannot be untangled and separated from one another. These voices draw their power from – and are, in effect, constituted by – their particular combination. Trying to change this knowledge of oneself can be a complicated process and, as the research participants testify, their role as authors of their own identity within this document is tied to legal, intersubjective procedures of negotiating a 'new' sense of self within the parameters set by the state. What struck me about this process of renegotiation was the profoundly self-reflexive and disciplinary nature of the gaze that operates in these participants' imagining of self within this document. Detail is strongly monitored for how it might be read, as these participants try to anticipate and align themselves with what they perceive to be the gaze of the state and of society. The creation of an official document of identity that corresponds to the subject-out-there (to them as a 'real' person) is a tough process for these men, and it is made all the more so as these documents can provide the necessary evidence to support them or to be used against them.

While the ID book may facilitate an intersection between the human body and its emergence in (state-sanctioned) discourses, it also establishes another threshold of sorts, namely the intersection of the private and public spheres. In this document photography explicitly shows which aspects of a human subject are deemed important in order to be rendered intelligible; or, more precisely, it shows how a photograph of a subject is answerable to the larger public arena in which it is circulated and archived. In the case of the research participants, one can actually see how such a profound emphasis on providing personal knowledge for public consumption can be experienced as severely disempowering, particularly if the different archival signatures that designate an identity



within the ID book do not correspond. The knowledge that was made visible and public in this document did not always match their conception of self, and that which photography made public through this archive stood, at one time or another, at odds with the body images they presented in public.

It is in this regard that Barthes's formulation of photography as a "perverse confusion" (1981: 79) of reality and history has particular significance when investigating these participant's ID books as visual archives. For Barthes, the human subject often confuses the concepts of the 'real' and the 'live' when dealing with photographs as these images may attest to something (or some identity) that has existed, but it cannot vouch that that something still exists. This confusion also marks the ID book as archive – be it in the photograph contained in this archive, or the document as a whole – as its evidential imagining as a time/subject-capturing device overshadows any idea of the subject as changing or multiple. This archive and the photograph it uses to recollect remain a façade that cannot facilitate total access to that which is depicted, and it is impenetrable and imprecise as it provides but a mediated interpretation of the human subject as he/she *might* have existed (or identified as) at a certain time. This archive is a good example of what Barthes calls the "excessive, monstrous" immobilisation of time (1981: 91), as its authority is determined by its purported ability to fix a certain reality upon paper. However, the reality that it seems to secure is but a reduction or interpretation of the human subject as he/she exists in the world-beyond-text/image. For all the power that is invested in this document for securing the human subject, its basic premise of inclusion (of framing and capturing) underscores processes of exclusion – it always recollects at the cost of what it fails to remember.<sup>129</sup>

Despite the authority that may be invested in the ID book as a device for framing the 'real', various realities can also escape its delineations. For the trans men who participated in this study, the knowledges of self that they might hold – be it a bodily, social or intellectual account of self – can easily exceed or contradict the frames provided by official institutions. As these men show, the experience of their own identities and bodies did not always fit comfortably within the frames that were demanded by their ID books –

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<sup>129</sup> Barthes's argument that photography can actually "block memory" and become counter-memory (1981: 93) bears some likeness to Derrida's conception of the archive's hypomnesic disposition – its tendency towards memory loss. For both Barthes and Derrida, a violence underscores their respective fields of investigation – a "monstrous" excessiveness (1981: 91) for Barthes in the case of photography and an "archivolithic" destructiveness (1995: 12) for Derrida in the case of the archive – that disrupts the assumed stability of photography and archival sciences. Both authors seem to share a feeling of trepidation towards media or institutions that claim prestige in the field of recollection, as such vehicles always provide a mediated, partial and somewhat slippery means to picture history.

their names and identity numbers changed and, at some time, the photographs that were supposed to recollect them became impressions of a gender identity that they have left behind. The very tools that were used to draw out their existence became markers of a reality that they chose not to identify with anymore. However, in order to be recognisable, these participants still had to accept the power invested in the ID book as a framing device, and they all chose to represent themselves within its frames by accepting and complying with its normative delineations. In fact, it seems as if their own ability to comply with its normative delineations is held in high regard by the participants – a viewpoint that shows that although the clear delineations that this document requires might pose a degree of struggle for these men, these delineations are also to a certain extent respected and coveted by them.

#### 4.1.3 The Man in the Archive

The power of the ID book to frame and to “resolve” an identity was a recurrent theme during the interviews with the research participants. Yet, for all the demands that are made by the ID book for presenting a coherent/readable identity and the legal power that it exerts as an authority on identity expressions, its ability to actually provide a final framework for such expressions are limited. Indeed, the change of information within these documents that trans subjects demand presents a case in point of how frames that determine recognisability can be called into question for their ability to frame a subject correctly/adequately. This document’s capacity for completely and finally framing (or “fixing”) a subject is undercut by the fact that both the subject and his/her history that this archive seemingly contains, exceed and break with the frameworks that it provides.

One of the ways in which the ID book fails to completely grasp its subject is reflected in this document’s inability to keep a record of the various (significant) changes that its bearer’s identity and body might undergo. Its fixation upon petrifying the human subject means that it presents but a sliver, a frozen moment, as evidence of a whole life; as a marker of a body and its identity as it has (or might have) existed in the past, and as it will (or might) exist in the future. As an archive, it anticipates and furnishes confirmation of the future of its subject (in particular, the *identity* of this subject) in the same way as it presumes to know its history, namely by drawing on a limited repertoire of information and expanding it to become *the* official placeholder of identity. Even though this archive assumes to know the identity of its subject, it often misrecognises, forgets or imagines incorrectly the exact way in which this identity has been and will be lived – for Robert, Munir and Charl, the very

need to change their ID books arises out of a mis-imagining on the part of various stakeholders (be it the state, their respective families, or even themselves) in the conception and enactment of their identities. For these men the ID book engenders a regular and regulated potential for embarrassment and misrecognition that can only be assuaged by 'fixing' it.

As the testimonies of the research participants demonstrate, an ID book that still shows a pre-transition self can lead to challenging and disempowering situations for post-transition/transitioning subjects. Some of this difficulty can be ascribed to the fact that this document can never really capture 'transness' per se – it allows for only two gender categories to be legally recognised in this document, and its function of creating stability undercuts any fluidity or inconsistencies. Its gendered foundation has strong implications for trans subjects as they either have to ensure that this document is brought into alignment with their bodies and gender identities (which would ensure that they can officially pass as the gender of their experience), or they have to cope with a document that can expose their trans status and that can, in extreme cases, render them unreadable/unbelievable within certain public institutions. Even though the ID book cannot frame a subject as trans in itself, a process of reading the document in conjunction with the bodily appearance of a given subject can lead to such a knowledge – 'transness' is thus made visible at the slippage between two archives. While a degree of slippage always pervades the reading on the ID book in conjunction with the human subject, these slippages may prove more ominous for trans subjects, who run the danger of having their identity called into question.

The ID book's overpowering ability to frame gender is also emphasised by Claudine Griggs (1998), who argues that the process of transitioning is necessarily marked by certain practices that provide emphatic evidence of gender change. As Griggs argues, "a transsexual cannot gradually transfigure life from man to woman or woman to man, because s/he cannot be perceived as anything between male and female" (1998: 1). For Griggs, the ability of being recognised as the gender of one's experience largely depends on having the right "supporting documentation" (1998: 40) such as an ID document, driver's licence or passport. These documents support the subject in more ways than one, as they can be important for rendering a subject recognisable, while they also bear official testimony to the subject's right to live as and display a particular gender identity. Identity documents can even be regarded, according to Griggs, as a supplement to the sexual characteristics of a subject as they resonate within and point towards the material body.

Even though the ID book can render a trans subject disempowered as its ability to frame and remember that subject cannot offer protection during times of gender transitioning, it can also be regarded as an empowering medium precisely because it forgets such transitions. Because of the narrow scope of this framing device, much information escapes the parameters of its scrutiny, and a history or identity can in effect be obscured by the information it chooses to push forward. In the context of this study, this document grants the participants the opportunity to legally visualise and narrate their male identities, while it also provides a means to keep a pre-transition self at bay. Its power of exposure – the very power that can put these men at risk by revealing their trans status – can also have the opposite effect of casting a shadow over that which escapes its knowledge-bearing systems. The ID book's restricted framing of time therefore allows these participants to (partially) rewrite their history in such a way that a restored version of self emerges – a version that, in their case, is male and not necessarily trans. In this framework, the changing of an ID book can be seen as a reparative task – as a form of autobiographical (re)writing through which a subject revises their past and, in effect, removes a certain aspect of their history from the public gaze.

A process of renegotiating the past is conspicuous in the accounts of all the research participants, and their accounts reveal a range of answers to the question of how much an identity document deals with a history of 'transness'. For Charl, whose current ID book corresponds closely to his experienced gender identity; his status as male has been confirmed within this document and it provides him with an archive that authorises his gendered existence. Unless he decides to disclose the fact that he transitioned, his ID book alone cannot bear testimony to his past. At the same time, Munir's ID book catches him in the process of transitioning and, even though it cannot in itself comprehend of transness, it still frames him in such a way that the document's exposure in public places reads against the grain of his experienced gender identity. While the ID book does not read him as trans, it makes him read as a transitioning subject precisely because it supports his social existence as a gendered human being. The power of this document as a supplement of the human being is made all the more relevant by Munir's opinion that, only with a new, "resolved" ID book in his possession would he actually feel "100% complete" (Personal Interview).<sup>130</sup> Without this "resolved" document, life in everyday society can be very hard – as Munir explains:

You go into places and they look at you, and it is very difficult because your ID says you are female. You can't even register at the gym as a male. So then

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<sup>130</sup> See Addendum B for a transcript of this interview.

you go as a female, which is difficult. Going out there and trying to find a job as a transgender person without a proper ID document also makes it difficult to get a job ... [and] when it comes to the outside, when you go somewhere where you have to produce your ID, it kind of makes me feel awkward, it definitely makes me feel awkward. Like when you walk into a bank and show your ID, there is that confusion when they look at your ID book and they go like “what”? And it is not always a place, a private place, where you can actually just get close to one person. And sometimes they don’t ask, they just ignore it, which makes you feel grateful. And that tells you that maybe there are people who know about transgender. But in general it does make me feel awkward when I have to show people the picture [in the ID book]. (ibid.)

As Munir’s repeated use of the words “difficult” and “awkward” underscores, the ID book is a challenging document for trans men because it can force them to explain themselves as gender transitioning subjects in order not to be misrecognised, or rather not to be rendered unrecognisable by the document that they carry for recognition. The ID book’s role of decisively stating the ‘obvious’ can place a tremendous burden on trans men as the clear-cut delineation and unambiguous gendering that this document requires runs counter to the process of gender transitioning and the ambivalence that such a change of gender may bring about. While identity documents are in themselves concerned with preventing uncertainty and confusion as to one’s identity, these documents can also place their trans bearers in public situations where confusion and misrecognition prevail. For this reason, public situations can be challenging to manage, hence they are often avoided, and the identity documents that are the cause of misrecognition are kept out of the public eye as much as possible.

While the ID book can provide a means to restore an identity and to reshape a history, it can also provide a place where the past can resurface. Charl and Munir place much emphasis on the power of the ID book to ensure that the pre-transition self becomes absent – that the pre-transition self is no longer just consigned to the past, but actually no longer visible/readable – while Robert sees his ID book as a place where the past should be allowed to resurface, albeit in a very controlled way. Robert chose to honour his “previous self” by including his pre-transition name, ‘Adele’, in his ID book (Personal Interview). This decision to include ‘Adele’, if only in name, coincides with his role as a trans activist; for Robert this was a political decision, one that slots into the advocacy and teaching work that he was doing at the time. By keeping ‘Adele’, he also feels that he can live an “authentic

life" (ibid.) – a life where his pre- and post-transition selves can actually co-exist. This decision was not, however, an easy one, and as Robert explains:

It [Adele] is not something that I often swing around, and I get embarrassed when people see it in my ID book. But I try to live an authentic life, and it would be absurd at my age to try and delete a whole part of my past. So I decided to keep it. I think I made that decision at a time when I thought that I could maybe embrace my feminine side. But it actually played out in such a way that I don't really connect with it anymore. But I honour my previous self in this way. (ibid.)

Honouring his past in his ID book is, however, not a permanent choice and, as Robert argues, he always thought that once he stops "being political", he would complete his name change by only adopting 'Robert' in this book (ibid.). However, given the exposure he has received in the media as a trans activist, leaving his past behind seems to be "only a fantasy" (ibid.) as his status as a gender transitioning subject cannot escape public knowledge, even if it is successfully removed from the ID book. The ID book's power to cement a certain identity/reality is thus restricted, in Robert's case, by the public nature of the knowledge that could counter its version of the 'truth'.

#### 4.1.4 Recollecting Vulnerability

As these accounts by the research participants reveal, the ID book provides an archive that simultaneously fights and leads to precarious situations. This is an archive with which to commence or reflect a change of gender identity, while it also serves as a place of shelter where an identity can be solidified and protected. Conversely, a subject can be rendered precarious or unreadable if an ID book does not correspond to his/her experienced gender status, and its function as an archive that commands can run counter to a subject's need for recognition and protection.<sup>131</sup> ID books, and in particular the ID photograph,

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<sup>131</sup> This understanding of the protective role of identity documents as highly ambivalent is also proposed by Namaste (2000), who argues that identity papers are central to the administration of trans identities insofar as they are needed to negotiate a variety of institutions. They serve important administrative and social functions as they demonstrate the legal citizenship and civil status of a given subject, while they are also central to the social integration of trans people. Namaste's investigation places particular emphasis on the vulnerability that ensues when these identity papers create a gap between the legal sex and social gender of a subject – a condition with which most trans people are confronted some time during their transition. This disjuncture between the visual image and the legal documents of a trans subject can create various problems for him/her in everyday society, and the absence of documents for trans people "deprives these individuals from achieving the status of person in society. The social relations of sex and gender are institutionally organised and reproduced through the use of documents" (2000: 260). Without legal documents, trans people "are inscribed as impossible, quite literally eliminated from the social text. *Transsexuals are produced through erasure*" (2000: 262, emphasis in original).

engenders a willing suspension of disbelief as they provide but a partial archive of a human subject – the viewer may entertain the idea of ‘photographic authenticity’ as a vague trope of representation without expecting an ID photograph to be accurate in every detail. However, this courtesy of suspension is less likely to be afforded to these trans men as the disparity between their bodily appearance and their ID documents can provoke unbelief. As Robert aptly describes:

At the beginning of my transition I didn’t even think about it, but the more ambivalent I presented to people, the more I realised that I needed this thing, I wanted to have it. And you know, when your ID repeatedly gets you into trouble and causes embarrassing situations, you realise how important it is.  
(ibid.)

For Robert, Charl and Munir, the act of transitioning can expose them to the regulatory forces that are central to the state’s recognition of its gendered subjects, and the ID book’s inclination towards securing identity proves to be difficult to negotiate for these men. This is especially true of times in which they are busy changing their own archives – be it bodily, visual and/or discursive archives. The ID book does not always keep time with the other archives that humans keep, and its objective to protect might in some cases be more concerned with information than with human subjects.

Obtaining a new ID book means that these men are granted the opportunity to partially reconstruct their identity in such a way that it has specific social and legal consequences. It also provides them with a license of sorts with which it is easier to assert themselves in public spaces. For this reason this book is regarded as a place where they can assert themselves – where they can visualise and document their agency. However, as their accounts also reveal, they are acutely aware of the degree to which their agency (or their experience/idea of it) is determined for them by state institutions, and that their identities have to fit into a certain template in order to gain from this document’s power. Despite their high regard for this document as a source of empowerment, their ability to simultaneously draw on its legal power and navigate its flawed systems of recollection reveals them to be erudite, if not slightly distrustful, users of this archive, perhaps more so than cisgendered people who rarely have to negotiate such a dramatic change of identity as trans people do. These participants bear an intimate knowledge of how a document can safeguard them, but also render them precarious, and they are aware that their ability to be recognised hinges on this document’s ability to provide a stable reiterative framework. This complex enactment of intersubjective/inter-archival relationships shows

that, in order for a life to be lived in a certain way, it has to be archived in a certain way, and the ID book is central in determining how a life can and should be archived.

It is perhaps due to the complexity of the function and meaning of the ID book that it occupies a central yet invisible position within the archives that the participants constructed for this thesis. These are sensitive documents to the participants as they have an intimate knowledge of how such documents can render them precarious. Unless these documents are demanded, they are also not readily disclosed – they are required for functioning in society and their visibility is more an issue of compulsion than of self-motivated disclosure. Perhaps for this very reason the ID photograph also engenders less affection than other photographs and, for all its public importance, is not an image that is particularly treasured for its individual, emotive value. Within archival modes of recollection, these images may not be particularly well liked, but they are much needed, and their value as framing devices for negotiating a degree of recognisability cannot be underestimated.



## 4.2 VISIBLE ARCHIVES: ON BEING AT A CENTRE

This chapter represents the core of this study, the point at which discourses around the visual dimension of archival recollection are concentrated. My investigation, which has thus far traced the (sometimes indistinct and ambiguous) outlines of three archives, is now firmly situated within the heart of these collections, namely the personal photographs that were selected by the three research participants. During the course of my investigation a process of selecting, interpreting and editing on the part of these participants led to their respective collections taking their current shape, and the three archives that are presented in this chapter bear testimony to such a method of deliberately choosing which photographs and narratives of self can be disclosed, not only to me as a researcher, but, by implication, to a reader. These collections, therefore, are influenced by a more traditional conception of the archive as a space where knowledge is shared and where information is necessarily open.

However, the fact that these archives were determined for their ability to disclose means that the knowledges that they represent were strongly monitored and strategically edited so as to create collections that closely correspond to the participants' current conceptions of self. The photographs that these archives foreground by making them visible are deliberately chosen and reproduced in order to provide a way of understanding (and recognising) some aspect of these participants' lives and identities. The selected photographs thus reveal the way in which the archive is comprehended as a vehicle for making a life intelligible by recollecting it in a certain way. For all the power of creating a visible public record that these archives might underscore, they do not necessarily imply a progression from the secret to the knowable as they disclose only in part and only through revision. That which is made visible revolves around that which remains sheltered and private, and these particular archives, which were created to be seen, can never provide an account of the human subject that is completely comprehensible precisely because their revelatory power always works with and against that which they put out of sight.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> In the context of this study these visible archives are clearly marked by that which they cannot include, namely that which remains invisible. Such invisible archives intersect with, but also delineate, the holding of the visible archives as they mark the margins where information becomes out of sight, but not entirely out of knowledge. Both the visible and invisible archives are thus marked by different boundaries between what can be recollected and what cannot be recognised, and that which is incomprehensible in one mode of archiving (such as the invisible) can bear tremendous weight in another. This tension between the visible and the invisible manifests itself in various ways and is repeatedly referenced throughout this chapter.

The delineation of these visible archives is based on the research participants' choice of five images that they consider to be important markers of their identity – a process which led to the images and narrations that are reproduced and included in the addenda of this thesis. Within these margins different responses to the research question led to the visible archives taking their current shape – while Charl and Robert chose five images that could be reproduced, and selected an additional image that they narrated (which is discussed in Chapter 4.3 under the invisible archives), Munir chose four images as he included his narrated image under his five-image selection. Munir's visible archive thus contains only four images as his invisible/narrated image (which is discussed in both Chapters 4.1 and 4.3) was counted as an important image.<sup>133</sup>

The complex nature of these archives is underscored by the way in which their holdings are defined – these archives are (in some cases) but a fragment of the research participants' own private collections, which they may not even conceive of as, or call, 'archives'. Robert's position as a professional photographer and his preference for using photographs to explore his identity was reflected in the plethora of images (ranging from personal artworks to cell-phone pictures) that he initially showed to me, and out of which he made his final selection. The process of editing these photographs was meticulous as each image had to have specific significance within his final archive, and those that were deemed to be somewhat similar, or unclear or inappropriate in the meaning they conveyed, were left out. Charl's final archive is a reflexion of his ambivalent feelings towards the photographic medium, and the few photographs that he has in his possession are almost all part of his final selection. In his case the process of selection was not so much governed by editing out as it was by proffering what he actually has. For Munir, the range of images from which he made his selection consisted of recent pictures that showed him after his "top-surgery"<sup>134</sup> and, even though this selection was relatively small, it was definitely growing. Munir was busy with what he described as a process of "experimenting" with his masculinity (Personal Interview), and he felt that photography provided a suitable medium for charting his change from his pre-transition appearance. Especially in Munir's case, I realised that the archives that were created were provisional – they drew on a selection that was bound to change and be supplemented. Hence, even though this chapter might present the most

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<sup>133</sup> It is important to note in this regard how my own systems of delineation impacted on the creation and reproduction of these archives as Munir's five-image selection is further delineated in terms of visibility and invisibility in order for these images to make sense within my own discursive archive.

<sup>134</sup> This term refers to a double mastectomy that forms part of the sex reassignment surgery that a trans man might choose to undergo.

visible intimations of how a personal archive can be conceived, it does not assume that such archives can in any way provide a total or finalised perspective on these participants.

#### **4.2.1 On Archivisation and Authorship**

Thus far this study has accentuated an idea of the archive as a space that is marked by complex systems of delineation, and this chapter is no exception. Even though the photographic archives that are discussed in this chapter appear to present the most clear-cut responses to the question of how identity can be visualised, the way in which these responses have been framed complicates the topo-nomological properties that appear to be so stable in these archives. On the face of it, these properties provide clear delineations so as to indicate the presence of the research participants as archivists and authors. In these archives the participants emerge as they commence and command with authority – as they initiate and preside over their own archival recollections. As archivists, they identified, interpreted and categorised the photographs so as to construct their particular narratives of self. They gathered a body of images and they framed these images in such a way that they made sense both in their unity (as a single corpus) and in the various contexts that these photographs alluded to. In this way the participants negotiated their role as archivists by constructing these particular archives out of their personal collections (an archive is thus created out of another archive), by grouping their selections together in a distinct way and by forming relations between the images that their archives consist of. These participants also took on the role of guardians (or archival custodians) of their selections insofar as they exercised their right to translate these photographs into knowledge – of telling the viewer how these photographs should be read and why they are rightful sources of information.

At the same time the specific topo-nomological structures of these archives are also based on a system of shared recollection, as these archives were created in response to the conditions set by this study. The role of archivist and author that surfaces in these archives cannot be conceived of in isolation for the very reason that my own role as researcher (or archivist) necessarily complicated the research participants' own systems of recollection. My presence and function as researcher implies that I inevitably played a role in framing their archives; yet even without adding my own voice to theirs, their personal/private collections are bound to the intersection of various voices and discourses, and they suggest a complex system of collective archivisation.

For example, when studying these personal archives, Robert emerges as a prominent figure in framing the other participants' identities, to such an extent that he can be regarded as a co-author of some of their photographs. One of Munir's photographs – Figure B4 – forms part of a series of images that Robert took of Munir, with the mere volume of this series (which comprised of fifteen images) being interpreted by Munir as Robert's attempt "to get to the perfect one that he [Robert] wanted" (Personal Interview).<sup>135</sup> Munir's own selection of this specific photograph for his visible archive is based on his interpretation of the idea of a "perfect image" – an image that he regards as closely aligned to Robert's idea of what such a "perfect image" would look like. Munir's understanding of the existence of an image that can be "perfect" is thus based on a process of anticipating (and imagining) how Robert would interpret and frame the elusive idea of "perfection". For Munir, this form of authorship is simultaneously "fun and difficult" (ibid.). Such an explanation can possibly be ascribed to his feelings of self-consciousness about having photographs taken of himself,<sup>136</sup> but also the degree of trust that he invests in Robert's ability to frame/authorise him 'correctly', that is, as conspicuously "different" from his pre-transition self (ibid.). As Munir contends, this photograph was taken with the idea of being shared, and it therefore had to be "good" (ibid) – a condition that he felt Robert would be able to understand and assist with, given his ability as a professional photographer, as well as his personal knowledge of how to capture a masculine version of self. Munir thus anticipates the role of a future audience in reading this image, and part of the trust that he invests in Robert's ability as co-author rests on the latter's aptitude for anticipating a public's reaction to this image.<sup>137</sup> Robert is charged with the responsibility of aligning Munir's need to be recognised as male with a public's reading of this image.

Charl also shares such a perspective on Robert's ability to help him authorise and archive his own identity, and two of the photographs selected for his visible archive were, in fact, taken by Robert – see Figures C4 and C5. When discussing these images, Charl shows much respect for Robert's ability to produce a visual record of his identity; yet the way in which Robert chose to represent Charl, and Charl's interpretation of these images, differ remarkably in each of the photographs. In Figure C4 Robert specifically chose not to show Charl's face as the latter was still in stealth at that time, and the image was to appear in a

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<sup>135</sup> See Addendum B for a transcript of this interview.

<sup>136</sup> Munir often refers to a degree of discomfort that he experiences when being photographed; I return to this issue later in this chapter, when I investigate his relationship with the medium of photography.

<sup>137</sup> In his feedback on the thesis, Robert comments on this assertion by stating "what a burden it has been" (Personal Feedback). For Robert, this is a position that demands a lot of responsibility and awareness, and one that he is not always comfortable with.

local magazine article that dealt with trans-related issues.<sup>138</sup> While his existence as a trans man is thus referenced, his personal identity is kept secret.<sup>139</sup> Even though Charl is ambivalent about the image, as he feels that it shows him as if he is “hiding” (Personal Interview),<sup>140</sup> he still admires Robert’s ability as a photographer, as well as his sensitivity towards Charl’s fear at that time of being rendered recognisable. Even though Charl dislikes the way in which he is framed in this image, his feeling of aversion is more orientated towards the role of the reader in interpreting this image as a sign of hiding than it is to Robert’s role in framing him as such. This idea shows how the audience is implicated in this process of authorship – a general (largely cisgendered) public played a large role in the creation of this image, as both Robert and Charl *anticipated* their reading of and reaction to it.

In contrast, Figure C5 – which was taken at a later stage when Charl was more comfortable with disclosing his status as a trans man – is described by Charl as a “good” image, one in which he is clearly identifiable and in which he appears as a “more open” person (ibid.). According to Charl, Robert managed to catch him “on a good day” and he thus produced a photograph that is “quite descriptive” (ibid.). Interestingly, some of its descriptive value hinges on Robert’s request for Charl to smoke in order to catch him with his “inevitable cigarette” (ibid.). It is in this account that Robert’s role as co-author emerges in a profound way, as Charl clearly identifies (and accepts) Robert’s part in recognising what is typical about his own identity. As Charl maintains, “he says that it is *me*” (ibid., Charl’s emphasis). By drawing on Robert’s interpretation of his identity, Charl’s role as archivist and author is revealed as enmeshed with the perspective of *an other* – in this case, another person whom he trusts to convey the ‘right’ idea of self.

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<sup>138</sup> This image appeared in an article for *The Big Issue* – a local magazine that is run by a non-profit organisation that aims to empower homeless, unemployed and socially marginalised people (*What is the Big Issue*. n.d. [Online]). The aim of the article, and the magazine in general, is to create awareness and empower people who find themselves in precarious situations.

<sup>139</sup> As Charl was not comfortable with sharing his identity at the time, he wished to remain anonymous – not being rendered identifiable thus speaks of a condition of perceived precariousness, and of trying to reference such a condition (without aggravating it by exposing his identity) in order to create awareness for disenfranchised people. This image thus references a general idea of trans existence by providing photographic ‘evidence’ of the bodily fact – the ‘beingness’ – of a trans man. To a certain degree, the absence of a clearly identifiable subject plays into this idea of providing a general outline of trans identity, and while Charl’s identity becomes invisible to the degree that he is no longer referenced as a *particular* subject, the *general* subjecthood of trans men is suggested by providing a template (a body without a face) into which such identities can be inserted.

<sup>140</sup> See Addendum C for a transcript of this interview.

At the same time, Robert emerges strongly as an author in his own archive, and he places much emphasis on his ability to document himself – as he reveals in a discussion of his photographic work, it is only recently that he “allowed” someone else to photograph him (Personal Interview).<sup>141</sup> Three of the photographs that he selected for his visible archive, he took himself (Figures A1, A2 and A5), and he regards these images as clear examples of his role as author/photographer of his own life. Even in the other two images (Figures A3 and A4) where other people actually took these photographs, Robert still manages to assert his own role as author. In Figure A4, a photograph that was taken by his wife, he presents himself to the camera in such a way that his own role in framing the meaning of the image seems to take preference – he invites the viewer into the picture frame, uses his hands to draw their attention to his chest, and he presents himself so as to give reference to it being a “joyous occasion” (ibid.).<sup>142</sup> He clearly acknowledges the presence of the camera – and, by implication, the viewer – and the way in which he describes this image as only available to a select audience shows how he exerts his power as author of this image by carefully selecting how to present himself and to whom to present himself. In Figure A3 Robert’s role as author clearly emerges in his ability to read the image against the grain of its ‘original’ meaning – he sees this image as a sign of his latent masculinity (in this case, his identification with his uncle’s masculinity) rather than his family’s original and preferred interpretation of this photograph as a sign of his adulation of his uncle.<sup>143</sup> In this way Robert emerges as an author who has the ability to frame and re-evaluate the content of the photograph in order for it to make sense within his own archive. In the case of these two images, Robert’s role of author is thus strongly based on his perceived capacity to provide the most persuasive voice (and to overrule other, competing voices) when discussing their possible meanings. The role of ‘successful’ authorship is thus largely conceived as

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<sup>141</sup> Robert uses the example of a photograph that was taken for a local magazine, *Rooi Rose*, to explain his reaction to the experience of being photographed by someone else (Personal Interview). To Robert, one of the most troubling aspects of this photograph was the way in which he was styled for the shoot – the stylist and make-up artist “wanted a specific look” for the readers of the magazine, Robert explains, and he couldn’t stand their vision of how he should be represented (ibid.). The end result is a picture that Robert describes as successful insofar as the photographer, stylist and make-up artist managed to represent him with something that he can identify with – in his words “in the end they got it, it’s me” (ibid.). Yet this picture was produced only after a “scuffle” and a “compromise” as to how he should be represented (ibid.), and the process of authorship was therefore not without a degree of contention. A feeling of disempowerment (of being dis-authored) pervades his reading of this photograph as various parties who had an interest in the message(s) it conveyed complicated its creation. This photograph was not chosen to be included in Robert’s personal archive and, even though he discussed the images and identifies it as a landmark of sorts, it is not granted a visual dimension in this study.

<sup>142</sup> In this context his newly-altered chest is presented as a cause for joy, the “happiest time” in his life (Personal Interview) – it becomes a sign of his status as male that, despite the medical setting, is a cause for celebration. I discuss this image later in this chapter in much more detail when I deal specifically with the visibility of the trans body.

<sup>143</sup> This is an issue to which I return later in this chapter, when I discuss this image in more depth for its significance as a vehicle for tracing masculinity.

dependent upon the narratives that accompany these images, and the way in which these images are represented and described is of critical value for ascertaining a specific type of controlled authorship.

Consequently, the archives that are created by the participants are orientated towards an autobiographic presentation of self, as they serve the purpose of lending substance (or proof) of a certain identity, in particular, the experienced gender identity of their creator. The topo-nomological dimensions of these archives thus underscore a conspicuously gendered form of authorship – one that counters ambivalence and uncertainty by presenting the subject as he emerges from the narratives and photographs. Similar to Lejeune's understanding of the function of autobiographical narratives, these archives display a means of pledging responsibility to the archivist/author as subject, in particular as the participants became identifiable as men. However, these archives differ from a conventional understanding of self-authorship, as they do not necessarily serve the function of merging the author, narrator and subject of a given photograph/narrative into one person, but rather of accentuating the subjects as they currently identify, that is, as they exist now and not necessarily as they had in the past. This feature is most conspicuous in Robert's archive, where a photograph of his "previous self" – see Figure A2 – is used as a point of reference from which to construct a different account of self. When discussing this image, Robert makes reference to himself appearing in costume – a reference that takes on multiple meanings as it depicts him wearing a bathing costume during the days when he still identified as female, while it also shows him appearing in a guise of sorts – being caught in a body he does not recognise anymore. As Robert maintains:

Everything about this photograph is a lie. I cannot identify at all with that person, I cannot recognise myself. When I look at it, I want to laugh. It's ok now, but I feel a nervous laughter within me. I cannot recognise anything about myself. Sometimes when I look at the image I can remember something about my legs, but otherwise nothing is familiar to me (Personal Interview).<sup>144</sup>

Even though Robert identifies with the subject of this image to the extent that he refers to it as "a photograph of myself", he later disidentifies with the subject depicted by describing this person as unrecognisable, as an identity (a costume) that he constructed and wore, but that now seems unfamiliar and uncomfortable (worn-out, so to speak). He describes himself as he "presented" as a heterosexual woman (*ibid.*) – a word that stands in contrast to his

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<sup>144</sup> See Addendum A for a transcript of this interview.

current status of “being” a man. A distance is thus created between the current subject, the “I”, and the previous self who is framed as “that person” (ibid.). In this case the photograph is treated as an artefact through which a personal history can be controlled and re-evaluated, and its function is not so much to preserve a history from the decay of time, but it rather forms part of a process of *wilfully expiring a history*.

What is striking about such a relationship with a personal history is the way in which something that is potentially dangerous and disruptive is tempered and kept in check. It speaks of a form of restraint, of reining in a history, so to speak, that is also concerned with keeping it at a safe distance. While this act speaks of tremendous control, it operates at a level where it appears to be almost effortless – in fact, in order for this relationship between disengagement and attachment to work, it should appear easy, as if the expired history cannot offer a real threat to the subject any longer, and it has become *almost* unimaginable. Yet this history is always gripped; kept at bay, but also kept close out of fear of letting it slip. This is a difficult position to maintain – during my conversation with Robert, I was struck by his anxiety when talking about his (non-)existent past, and by his decisive stance on the pre-transition history that this photograph alluded to. It was as if Robert did not trust the photograph to adequately convey the distance he felt (or wished to feel) from his pre-transition self, thus words had to be galvanised to keep the image in check/at bay.<sup>145</sup>

Prosser’s formulation about the pre-transition body of trans men as an “absented presence” (1998: 213) that surfaces in photographs is borne out in this context, as Robert simultaneously asserts and denies the referential value of this photograph. He treats it as an incarnation of a past body that was, in effect, not really his/him. This image seems to remind him of what he is not any longer, and the (now rejected) presence that it alludes to “haunts” – to use Prosser’s idea (1998: 215) – a reading of the photograph in a post-transition context. In Prosser’s words, a photograph of a pre-transition subject has to be “killed” by a post-transition subject in order to diminish its ability to disrupt the “stability” of this subject’s experienced gender identity (1998: 217). In Robert’s case his explanation of Figure A2 seems to be concerned with assuaging its spectral value – he disowns this subject and frames “it” as false, as a “lie” (Personal Interview), in order to create a necessary distance between a present and an absent self. Robert creates a narrative in

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<sup>145</sup> In retrospect, I try to remember (and imagine) how I presented myself to Robert when he showed me this image. To some degree this image felt like a test – I felt honoured that he was willing to share it with me, but also aware that I was being read for my reaction to it. What did I look like when he showed me this image – a question both trivial and significant, it seems, but neither Robert nor I can remember my response.



which he observes himself as an object, a non-person, thus participating in the process of self-objectification.<sup>146</sup> This process is of particular significance, given the fact that he is also very critical of the way in which he had been objectified when he presented as a woman. As Robert argues:

The reason I feel bad about this image is because I have memories of being a woman and being sexualised and objectified, and this image is like that, with my hand on my hip and the costume I am wearing. And when I look at that now, how exposed my body seems, it just makes me remember how uncomfortable it felt being a woman (Personal Interview).

This interpretation shows how Robert is both complicit in and condemning of forms of objectification that occur through the camera's lens. To some degree his current objectification of his pre-transition, female body echoes those modes of objectification that he was subjected to as a woman. His need to create a distance from this pre-transition body by any means possible indicates that such objectification is part of the vocabulary that is drawn upon. The spectre that haunts this image is perhaps the same as that which Robert is critical of, but that he inevitably has to take up to try and lay this image to rest. Then again, the distance that he tries to create, or that he wants to suggest he has already created, is thwarted by the very emotional response this image evokes. It is an image that still makes him "nervous", "uncomfortable" and even "hysterical" (Personal Interview) – it is an image that still haunts from an intimate distance.

Robert's role as author and narrator of this image thus produces a condition where the pre-transition subject is simultaneously recognised and rendered unrecognisable. The process of creating a distance between the author and the depicted subject is necessitated by the need to cement the role of the author as he is currently gendered – of merging the role of the author with the subject as *he exists now*. For Robert, this form of authorship appears to be based on a process of simultaneously referencing and distancing himself from a pre-transition subjectivity in order to facilitate his discursive emergence as a 'new' being, so to speak. Gilmore's formulation on autobiography, of "pushing an individual forward out of a dense set of relations" (2001: 12), is made all the more evident in this case, as Robert authorises himself by means of accentuating his distance from a 'discarded' subjectivity.

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<sup>146</sup> I return to this idea later in the chapter, when I deal with the corporeal visibility of transness within photographic archives.

In the context of such a reading of a pre-transition past, the idea of pushing an individual forward does not necessarily imply that the relationship between the current subject/author and a past self is troubled. Neither does it imply that a subject's interpretation of a past self is by implication concerned with a process of disidentification. In fact, referencing a pre-transition subjectivity and renegotiating its relation to a post-transition identity can also aid in a process of tracing a current identity back to, and projecting it upon, the past – in the context of this investigation, this practice largely occurs through re-evaluating a pre-transition subjectivity by searching for clues of a masculine self. A procedure for accessing the past is conspicuous in Robert's interpretation of a childhood photograph that he selected for his visible archive – see Figure A3. Similar to Figure A2, this image also shows a pre-transition subject, yet the way in which it is interpreted shows a different orientation towards the past. Figure A3 serves as an antidote to Figure A2 – while the former is presented as a portrait of the subject/author as a child, the latter is described as the “before” or “pre-photo”, as the visual antithesis to his current identity.

To a certain degree both images are concerned with a process of choosing to pose for the camera, and of purposefully choosing a costume (be it a bathing costume or a gun holster) that can assist in this presentation of a gendered self. Yet the reason why Robert chooses these images and the way in which they are framed by narrative demonstrate how the visual presence of a pre-transition self is not perceived by Robert as a threat per se to the coherence of his post-transition subjectivity, as long as this “previous self” is authored and archived ‘correctly’ – that is, in line with, or directed towards, his current gender identity. Figure A3 plays an important role in this regard, as this portrait of Robert as a young child is treated as a vehicle for accessing and re-authoring a past – the image is interpreted as a sign of his admiration of masculinity (the masculinity embodied by his uncle), and his own role in taking on such masculine codes. The present and the future are implanted in the past through an act of reparative narration, and the photograph is marshalled as a site that foretells the future. When asked whether he could think of specific words to describe this image, Robert chose “boy”, “happy” and “connected” (Personal Interview) – words that, in their combination, bolster an idea of a pre-transition masculinity that was briefly lost (an idea that he explains on the basis of Figure A2) and then later regained (as exemplified in Figures A1, A4 and A5). Through Robert's treatment of this image, it becomes a vehicle for showing that the future played itself out as he might have imagined at that stage of his life – the boy that was captured in this image and that he possibly thought himself to be, became the man he is today.

This idea also surfaces in Charl's archive, where one of his favourite images is, in fact, of him as a pre-transition subject – see Figure C1. This photograph is arguably one of the images that fits most 'comfortably' into Charl's archive insofar as he sees it as an image that captures him at a contented stage of his life (it is, in fact, one of the only images that Charl describes as "precious" and one that he deliberately safeguards), and that he chooses to share with an audience for this very reason (Personal Interview).<sup>147</sup> When asked what this image communicates to him, he explains "I think of all the images that were taken of me, I am at my happiest in this particular photograph, and I think it shows. I suppose for myself, I don't think that there has been another period like that, ever" (ibid.).<sup>148</sup> In addition, its power as a visual archive of identity rests on its ability to capture him in a way that he describes as masculine – for Charl, this is a "fairly butch photograph" (ibid.) that supplements his current status as male. As Charl admits, if this photograph presented him in a way that could be read as feminine, it would become a problematic image – one that would, most probably, not be included in his archive.

A similar perspective is adopted by Munir, who identifies a "split" in his identity that can be translated into a clear delineation between a pre- and post-transition self (Personal Interview).<sup>149</sup> This split is, however, not rendered visible in his archive, as he deliberately chooses not to reference his pre-transition self. For Munir, it seems as if the possibility of re-authorising one's account of self does not involve a reframing of a pre-transition subjectivity, but lies rather in the ardent enunciation of a masculine identity. While Charl chooses to give an account of self that draws on a pre-transition example, this decision is largely based on his belief that his appearance in this image can be read as masculine. Both Charl and Munir thus choose not to include images of a pre-transition self that can render them ambivalent or in which they would be clearly identifiable as female – such images are rather transformed into narrative (as discussed on Chapter 4.3), and are never granted a visual dimension. Their visible archives are rather concerned with establishing (albeit in very different ways) an unequivocal and unambiguous sense of masculinity. In Robert's archive a strong then-and-now narrative cements an idea and a picture of his transition as clear-cut, while Charl and Munir avoid any visual or textual signs of ambiguity that relates to their pre-transition or transitioning life.

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<sup>147</sup> See Addendum C for a transcript of this interview.

<sup>148</sup> As both Charl and Robert pointed out after reading this quote, Charl's happiness at this particular stage of his life was motivated by complex factors, and this quote should not be misinterpreted to suggest that he was happy because he was still female.

<sup>149</sup> See Addendum B for a transcript of this interview.

What also surfaces in all these accounts of self is an idea of the archive as a space where autobiographical narratives can be mediated – where multiple versions of self can emerge, be re-evaluated, be consolidated, or even be discarded in order to find the most suitable version. Robert describes such a process as a means to simultaneously *question* and *resolve* his identity:

To be a trans person, and to consciously transition in public, means that you apply that constant rethinking of gender and what it means to be a man to other parts of your life and other parts of your identity. And you realise, you can also *reboot* other things, you can also *rewrite* other parts, you can *give your life new layers*. So I think it taught me to question all my identities. Or not to only question identity, I have always been doing that, but to resolve it.  
(Personal Interview, my emphasis)

For Munir, this process entails a form of experimentation, of trying-out different forms of masculinity and of trying to find a masculine version of self that suits him best (Personal Interview). His visible archive is concerned with charting a process of change through which a progression of sorts can be visualised in response to his pre-transition identity. Much of this progression is, however, only known to him as he chooses not to include visual material that could frame his pre-transition appearance, and he only gives recognition to post-transition experimentations with masculinity. The reparative dimension of his archive is thus strongly based on a choice of what *not* to disclose. For Charl, whose relationship with photography is more tenuous, his visible archive provides a means to (re)contextualise and re-author the way in which he has been framed through photography – the narrative value of his archive is emphasised for its ability to give recognition to the vulnerability he experiences when dealing with photographs of himself.<sup>150</sup>

These accounts of personal recollection share an idea of the archive as a space where the past can, in effect, be refigured by means of narrative processes, as such processes seem to allow for the participants to redress (and to layer) a complex personal history. These accounts emphasise the role of the author/archivist as a person who appears to be in

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<sup>150</sup> For Charl, narrative accounts are important as they allow for the viewer of the photographs to read them 'correctly'. While this is also true for the other participants, Charl offers the strongest opposition to photography's overwhelming power to frame and stereotype, which is the reason why he prefers text above image. According to Charl, words and text, which can be used to "supplement" a photograph (Personal Interview), also have the power to contain an image, to keep it from getting out of hand, so to speak. This is a point to which I return in my discussion of precarity and the medium of photography.

control of the narrative process – as a person who assumes the responsibility to (re)make an account of self by deciding how, and to what extent, a personal history should be made visible and knowable. The gravity with which these roles are enacted differ, as each of the participants displays varying degrees of seriousness when talking about his personal archive – while Charl seems to feel that his own role as archivist carries great weight (that it is a difficult thing to do, and that it therefore has to be done carefully and accurately), Munir and Robert approach their roles in a more playful manner. Robert, in particular, invests a sense of irony in his own role as archivist, as he seemed intent on demonstrating that this is a role that he can play easily and lightly. While this might just be part of his personality, his humorous take on this role can also be seen as an attempt to disarm the possibly serious and precarious nature of his archive – to underplay and laugh at that which might be hurtful, traumatic or possibly dangerous.<sup>151</sup>

This reparative dimension is also profoundly intersubjective, as it necessitates an understanding of the archive as simultaneously geared towards the self as well as an other – an audience to whom this (repaired) account of self is directed. During the creation of these archives, the process of explaining images through narrative underscores a way of bodying forth information that is as much addressing the self as it is an audience. For this reason these archives are not strictly situated in the realm of the individual, as they point towards a complex system of recollection where a social dimension is always at play. These archives are situated between the past and the future, the subject and the social, the visual and the textual, as well as the discursive and the embodied, as concurrent processes of *sharing and participating* in a sense of self is central to their visual and narrative constitution.

The notion of sharing an archive is perhaps nowhere more conspicuous than in Munir's allusion to an archive that exists within and is reflected by one of his chosen images. Figure B2 is the result of a process in which Munir converted two existing photographs into the current image by inserting these photographs into a digital template that he found on the internet. The resulting image shows two hands of an anonymous viewer who is apparently contemplating Munir's photographs. As suggested in the background, these two photographs form part of the photographic archive of another person, as they were selected (the template seems to suggest) from the box of photographs in the left-hand corner. In this careful blend of 'fact' and 'fiction', of imagining a personal past within an

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<sup>151</sup> This idea is best reflected in Robert's discussion of Figure A4 where he seems to use humour to lighten the tone of an event that could otherwise have been, in his opinion, quite grim – I elaborate on this idea later in this chapter, when I discuss the image in more depth.

archival replica, a public/personal meta-narrative is created that speaks of and is geared towards an audience. While this image draws upon a public template (one that is available to anyone who uses the internet and that other people have most likely also used), the narrative that is created is made personal by the fact that specific images can be inserted into it. This template thus seems to create the opportunity for imagining the personal within a public setting, and of using its frame of generalisation to highlight the individual as a social being. It is, however, important to note that the use of a template in this image is not always conspicuous to the viewer, as it operates (on a technical level at least) in a fairly seamless manner.<sup>152</sup>

On one level, a person is implied, one who is holding these photographs and, in Munir's words, who is "admiring" them (Personal Interview). At the same time, the viewer of this image is implicated by placing it in a position that coincides with the gaze of the portrayed admirer (the template seems to suggest that the position of this admirer is interchangeable with that of the viewer). The hands of the portrayed admirer/archivist act as placeholders as they allow (and urge) the viewer to participate in this archival fantasy. The depicted scene of domesticity (with flowers and perfume bottles and a cup of tea) also seems to speak of such an attempt at inviting the viewer into an environment that is supposedly 'safe' and homelike. In this way Munir is depicted as a subject who is worthy of admiration, while a viewer is called upon to participate in this gesture of endearment – this portrayal thus involves a form of interpellation that calls into being both the subject and an audience. The emphasis that is placed on sharing an idea of 'archive' thus demonstrates how this image is geared not only towards supplementing and repairing the archive of the subject, but also the archive of an anonymous other. It seems as if this image speaks of a perceived gap that might exist in different archives – be it in Munir's own archive, a family archive, or even a larger archive of public knowledge/acknowledgement.

For all the participants, sharing an archive is based on careful consideration of the role of a future audience as consumers and interpreters of knowledge. Personal, private information – be it in the form of narratives or photographs – is included with the idea that it will/can be shared, and it is carefully monitored for exactly what it can reveal about the participants once it has been placed in their archives. These archives are thus invested in a process of making public some aspects of the personal, which does not imply that the participants give (or were ever expected to give) a comprehensive, unrestricted account.

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<sup>152</sup> When Munir first showed the image to me, I was not aware that it was created from a digital template and, only when I asked him about the identity of the person whose hands are depicted, was my attention drawn to the way in which this image was produced.

For instance, while the selected photographs might be framed as shareable, the varying audiences towards which these images are geared differ tremendously. During the interviews with the participants this was clearly demonstrated by their response to the question of who they would share specific images with. In Munir's archive, for example, Figure B2 is regarded as shareable with the general public and personal friends, with the exception of his current partner, while Figure B3 is regarded as an image whose audience is determined by context-specific criteria and it is not "for everybody to see" (Personal Interview).<sup>153</sup> While Charl sees no problem with sharing most of his chosen images, Figures C4 and C5 are also highlighted for certain restrictions in terms of viewing. Figure C4, which depicts Charl as a faceless, anonymous subject, is deemed suitable for public circulation, but not necessarily for sharing with friends; and Figure C5 is considered to be shareable with anyone, with the exception of his mother (Personal Interview).<sup>154</sup> The same delineations also arise in Robert's archive, where images are granted different levels of exposure given the anticipated presence of a public audience. Figure A1, for example, is deemed shareable with anyone, while Figure A4 is shared only with a select audience.<sup>155</sup> For all these participants specific regulations govern the way in which their photographic collections are shared with an audience.<sup>156</sup>

Such differential modes of sharing point towards the way in which these particular archives differ from a more traditional perspective on archival sciences, as they do not assume to serve as *the* foundation of knowledge about a subject, but they rather propose that an

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<sup>153</sup> Such stipulations are based on specific details that do not necessarily relate to his experience of being a trans man. The viewing restrictions imposed on Figure B2 is based, for example, on the fact that he appears with a previous love interest (something that Munir felt might upset his current partner), while Figure B3's constraints are based on him being self-conscious about his personal appearance, in particular his weight.

<sup>154</sup> As is the case in Munir's archive, such restrictions are based on specific instances that are identified in the images. Figure C4, which shows Charl as if he is "hiding", is not really suitable for showing to friends because it is, in his words, "not open" enough; yet the very fact that his identity is concealed made it a fitting image for circulating amongst a public audience (Personal Interview). Figure C5's restriction is based on the fact that Charl's mother does not approve of him smoking and, as he poses with a cigarette, this is an image that is deemed unsuitable for sharing with her.

<sup>155</sup> Figure A1, Robert's honeymoon photograph, is regarded as an image that is "all appealing" and thus suitable for showing to anyone (Personal Interview), while Figure A4, Robert's post-surgery photograph, shows a carefully monitored response to the question of public disclosure, given the sensitivity of the image and Robert's own attempt at controlling its interpretation.

<sup>156</sup> It is important to note the impact that this thesis might have on such viewing restrictions, as they cannot necessarily be guaranteed once this thesis is in the public domain. This point was communicated to the participants when we discussed the project and, to a certain degree, such restrictions were lifted – on the basis of the fact that the discussion of the images forms part of a larger academic project (which might imply a certain type of readership and audience), or in some cases that such restrictions form part of the participants' own archival and viewing systems that occur alongside (or beyond) the system employed in this thesis. The participants were made aware of the fact that this thesis and the images that it contains will be shared with a public audience – one that they cannot determine or control.

understanding of a subject is always partial. The research participants do not approach their collections as a space of total knowledge that can be projected onto their lives, but they wilfully choose which areas of their lives to visualise, and thus include, and which areas to render unknowable and invisible. In addition, these archives' function of conservation is also supplemented by a profound understanding of their role as a means to initiate a certain account of life. For the participants the creation, selection and presentation of images are not merely orientated towards an understanding of their archives as spaces for storing memories of the past, but these processes are also directed towards the future, that is, their future lives as *men*. I would argue that the participants' archives are perhaps more concerned with creating a personal record of their identity as they see it at the moment and wish to see it in the future than it is with bearing testimony of the past. The process through which they produce these archives plays a profound role in determining which areas of their lives they choose to disclose, which narratives are used to contextualise and explain the images, and how the past can be (re)interpreted and edited in order for it to make sense within their respective archives/lives.

#### **4.2.2 On Photography and Subjectivity**

The idea that these personal archives can verify some form of human existence speaks of the centrality that modes of visual representation enjoy within their systems of recollection. This notion is, however, not clear-cut or unambiguous as the participants' interpretation of the medium of photography suggests a complex response to the notion of the recollected/represented 'real'. At times the idea that photography can provide an intimate link to the self has particular currency in these participants' interpretation of their photographic archives. For example, photography is sometimes treated by the participants as a vehicle for verifying and fixing a certain idea/presentation of self, and the positivist assumptions invested in this medium are particularly pronounced. An investment in the evidential bearing of photography is clear in those cases where the images that are chosen by Robert, Munir and Charl are specifically cited for their ability to locate the subject – the "me". In addition, the self that is identified is in most cases visibly gendered as male or slanted towards a masculine understanding of self. As reiterative frameworks, the chosen photographs demonstrate an intense exertion of control over self-image as they are largely in agreement (or read as such by the participants) as to the depiction of their gender identity. With the exception of one photograph that was chosen by Robert – Figure A2 – all the images are inclined towards an awareness of the participants as male or masculine. Photography's power of authentication is therefore not



necessarily linked to a singular photograph's ability to capture 'correctly', but rather to the repetition of an idea of 'correctness'. Photography's reiterative dimension is used in the service of a 'masculine ontology' – that is, in pursuit of being and becoming masculine through its visual reproduction.

Photographs are particularly valued by the participants as semblances of knowledge, not only for renegotiating knowledge of a past self, but also for constructing and anticipating knowledge of a present and future self. Concurrent with a belief in photography's referential value runs a notion that photographic accounts of self are sometimes in need of repairing as they are neither complete nor timeless. The aura of authenticity that pervades the photographic medium is simultaneously celebrated and counteracted as these participants have a vested interest in it being both accurate and malleable. The photograph's ability to reiterate is also underscored by an investment on the part of the participants in breaking with certain (gendered) frameworks, and concurrently in reinforcing their position within such frameworks. As reiterative structures, photographs provide a means of charting a process of change from one gendered framework to another, while they also provide a centre of iterability (in the case of this study, a visual template for a masculine self) around which various articulations of self take place. In this case, Butler's definition of frames is particularly relevant as she maintains that "the frame functions normatively, but it can, depending on a specific mode of circulation, call certain fields of normativity into question" (2009a: 24). For the research participants, much value is invested in their ability to call certain gendered frameworks into question, while they also place much emphasis on their ability to adopt other frameworks – in this case, the act of calling a frame (of gender) into question is not a means to disrupt such frames altogether, but rather to (re)locate oneself within them.

Robert strongly emphasises photography's value as a framing device as he regards the self-reflexive/self-reflective nature of the medium as essential for orientating his own sense of self – as he contends, "I have used photography to find myself" (Personal Interview). Moreover, his preference for photography over text is emphasised, as he feels that "on a level of creating your identity, this is where I go and search for it – photos, not stories" (ibid.). Along these lines, photographs are treated as a means of accessing and exploring ideas surrounding self – they are not seen as passive receptacles of knowledge, but as central to a practice of identity construction. For a trans man photography underscores a particular process of responding to changing (visual) knowledges in order to negotiate a

sense of self – as Robert argues, “any reflection of myself or photos of myself helped me to see whether I am getting there or not” (ibid.).

Photography is therefore treated as a medium through which an idea of self is reflected – an idea that can, in turn, be projected upon the future. By being regarded as an intermediary of sorts, photography is invested with the power of speaking of and speaking to the self. In this case the idea of photography as a tool for looking out (of the body) and looking in (to the mind/self) is expanded as its potential for self-reflexive dialogue is invested in the self-to-come. For Robert, this implies an understanding that his life as a man is deeply invested in his ability to anticipate and evoke what this life will look like and how it can be lived. The ability of photography to frame (and create) a reality is thus referenced, as it seems to provide a means of recollecting a past in order to draw it back to a current sense of self, while its use is also orientated towards an understanding that such recollection will have bearing on how the future is lived. Photography’s reiterative power is therefore particularly valued for charting change and for showing difference, be it in the actual difference between the past and present subject, or the anticipated difference between the present subject and the subject-to-come.

Munir’s view of photography resonates with such a perspective as he sees the medium as a tool for charting a process of experimentation. He describes this process as inclined towards trying to find “what is actually going to suit me and make me feel more masculine” (Personal Interview). A feeling of ambivalence, however, pervades his view of photography as a vehicle for constructing knowledge – while he regards photographs as important for giving recognition to post-transition representations of self, he also emphasises photographs as inaccurate insofar as they can “create stereotypes when you deal with identities” (ibid.). As Munir maintains, he *used* to believe that photographs can provide an accurate account of identity (ibid.), yet his current view on photography (and particularly the photographs contained in his archive) is rather slanted towards an understanding of the medium as a means to register a process of experimentation and change, and not so much with solidifying a specific identity. For all the value that he might place on experimentation, Munir’s chosen images still centre on a particular idea of masculinity and, even though the representation of masculinity might differ (slightly) in his chosen photographs, they still comply with a clearly gendered framework. The degree to which experimentation takes place thus seems to rest on the ‘stability’ of a masculine framework and, even though Munir sees these images as tools for testing different *appearances* of masculinity (such as hairstyles, facial hair, body language, etc.), the *fact* of

his masculinity is not necessarily in question. The process of experimentation that is described thus takes place in line with (and not at the cost of) his male identity.

While Robert and Munir assign varying degrees of significance to photography in their respective processes of “searching for” and “experimenting with” their identities, Charl’s stance towards the medium’s capacity for recollecting the self is perhaps the most critical. Charl feels that he does not have enough understanding of photography to be an informed user and interpreter of the medium. When asked whether he considers photography to be an empowering medium, he responds:

It is a difficult one, because I like taking the odd photograph myself, but I don’t think I can take a good photograph of something – I’m not good enough. So no, it is not empowering for me because it doesn’t help me to express myself. I can express myself better with words. I can admire a good photograph, but I don’t even know if I can read a photograph; as people say, look at a photograph to see what the photographer is trying to tell you or the subject is trying to tell you. I rather go for words. (Personal Interview)

For Charl, an inability to completely understand photography renders it somewhat ineffective as a form of communication.<sup>157</sup> However, he still feels that photographs can be important for describing an (or his) identity, if a person who is knowledgeable on photographic discourse and practice is brought into the equation. As Charl doesn’t see himself as a skilled photographer, he relies on the expertise of another person to frame him ‘correctly’ or, in his words, in a “tasteful” way (*ibid.*). Charl’s use of the word in this context seems to denote a sense of refinement and sensitivity that does not cater for the sensationalist or lurid in the sense that it doesn’t fixate upon or make a spectacle of his transness, but rather focuses on his experienced identity as male.

A relationship of trust between photographer and subject is of critical importance to Charl, and as an example of such a relationship he cites Robert as a co-author, as someone who can frame Charl in a manner that he is conformable with, and who can take a photograph that is actually readable to Charl. As Charl asserts, “I know Robert takes a very good

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<sup>157</sup> Such an idea is, however, countered by his critically aware reading of his own photographs – Charl is acutely aware of what they communicate to him and what they might communicate to an audience, and during the interviews he emerged as a skilled reader of the photographic medium. I would argue that it is rather feelings of distrust that surface when he talks about photography, as well as his preference for other media when representing himself, instead of it solely being a case of ignorance on his part about the communicative dimensions of the medium.

photograph ... so I would trust him with any image, I would look at it and say 'ah, that is what this is saying'" (ibid.). It therefore seems as if Charl's ability to access some form of knowledge via photography is based on his relationship with a photographer and their combined ability to see eye-to-eye (that is, to be in accord). In this case Robert's role as photographer is emphasised for his aptitude for framing knowledge in such a way that is comprehensible to Charl. Charl's professed inability to see *himself* through photography thus necessitates a relationship with an other, or rather, with another's lens (be it an eye, camera or frame)<sup>158</sup> through which an idea of self can be brought into line.

The divergence that shows up in the participants' relation with photography as an authorising medium reveals varying degrees of trust that is invested in the medium's capacity to capture 'correctly'. Of all the participants, Robert seems to have made the most extensive use of the medium as a means to archive himself, and he emerges as someone who clearly understands the medium, both in his capacity as a professional photographer, and in his use of the medium to chart his own transition. As Robert maintains during one of his interviews, he is well trained on how to frame himself through photography as "I have photographed myself so many times I know exactly when I look good" (Personal Interview). One can argue that the gaze of the camera is to a large extent the gaze of the self insofar as Robert places much value on his ability to see and authorise himself through the medium of photography. Years of experience have made him acutely aware of how to present himself for the camera and, by implication, for an audience/viewer. His ability to construct a clearly demarcated, coherent photographic archive (one in which he feels in control over how he is portrayed) is influenced by his aptitude for anticipating how the viewer might read this archive.

This capacity for reading an audience also led me to reflect on my own role as one of the primary spectators of his archive – during the interviews I was, after all, the person to whom these images were directed with the idea that I will interpret and share them as I see fit. Robert (as well as the other participants) anticipated my own reading of his archive and the selection he made reflects to some extent what he thought *I wanted or needed to see*. This idea made me acutely aware that, as much as I try to read or grasp these men and their lives, they are perhaps also trying to grasp mine, and that their interpretation of

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<sup>158</sup> If Barthes's description of photography as an umbilical cord is used in this context, it seems as if the link between the subject and itself as thing takes a circuitous route through the eye of an other – eyes that play a *real* role in seeing the subject when taking a picture, but eyes that are also *imagined* by the subject for the thoughts that the other might hold when looking at and framing the subject. The eyes/lens of an other thus exist, in part, in the mind of the subject insofar as the latter imagines the thoughts of an other that accompanied the lenses that were used to gaze upon the subject's body and frame it.

me (of what I might know and, significantly, of what I might fail to understand) is already entrenched in the selection that they made.

Robert's selection of photographs also shows much attentiveness to the role of an audience, as the images in his archive seem to invoke the gaze of a spectator. While Robert meets the gaze of the camera in all the images, he also invites the gaze of a viewer in some of them – Figure A4 is a good example of how Robert poses for the camera so that the gaze of the viewer is invited into the picture frame, and also directed to his body. Robert's selection of images shows an acute understanding of his own position in posing for the camera – of presenting himself and displaying his body in such a way that a certain part of his identity and/or history can be brought into focus.

Munir's encounter with photography differs in this regard, as he feels a degree of discomfort with a medium that, in his opinion, forces him to express and expose himself (Personal Interview). In addition, photography seems to represent a way of "look[ing] back" that Munir finds unnecessary in (or even disruptive of) his current "life as a man" (ibid.). For Munir, the camera's gaze is thus seen as something that can intrude and trap, and that can get in the way of living one's life. Yet its purported ability to 'capture' a moment in time also suits Munir's quest for creating visual references of his post-transition identity, and such references are largely recounted with pride as they found their way in his visible archive.

While Robert's interpretation of photography is based on an idea of interaction, and Munir is interested in the medium's ability to map out a process of experimentation, Charl's relationship to the medium is much more complex. One example of this can be seen in his decision not to return the gaze of the camera – while Robert and Munir return the gaze in all of their photographs, Charl does not relate to an implied audience/viewer in the same way as Robert and Munir do. While Robert actually invites the gaze of the viewer, Charl's discomfort with the lens is (with the exception of Figure C1) noticeable throughout his archive. Charl's refusal to return the gaze of the camera is ascribed to his discomfort with the medium – with a feeling of self-consciousness that arises whenever he is aware of being photographed (Personal Interview). For Charl, the best way of dealing with his own camera-shyness would be to busy himself with something else and not to look at the camera – in his opinion, the best photographs are produced when he isn't aware of the exact moment when they are taken. As Charl explains with regards to one of the images – Figure C2 – in which he chose not to return the gaze of the camera:

I am always very self-conscious when photographs are taken. I wouldn't say that I was aware of when the photograph was going to be taken, I knew that photos were going to be taken, but I couldn't say that *that* was the moment that they were going to take the photograph. So I didn't feel as self-conscious because I was busy doing something else. I don't like posing for a photograph, because I don't know what to do with myself when I have to pose...if they have said to me 'stand still and wait for the photograph', it would definitely have been a different photograph. (Personal Interview, Charl's emphasis)

As this interpretation reveals, the camera demands a way of presenting oneself – of doing something with the self – that Charl is not comfortable with, and the best way to avoid such ways of posing would be to present himself as if he takes no notice of the gaze of the camera. This line of reasoning implies a way of posing that does not seem posed and it pretends candour on the part of Charl's performance of his identity. This perspective appears to hinge on the idea that some forms of photography can be more 'natural' as they capture a subject as they 'really are' and not as they consciously project an identity for the camera. At the same time Charl seems to be aware of photography as a device that *always* frames and constructs (whether one wishes it to or not), which is why he is also distrustful of the medium. His decision not to return the gaze of the camera thus seems to be based on an idea that the medium cannot frame him correctly, but that some frames are more correct than others.

It is within this range of images of unreturned gazes that Figure C2 also stands out as an image that haunts me. It is in this small, severely pixelated and tightly cropped image that Charl almost becomes unrecognisable to me. This was perhaps because of the importance that he attached to this particular image – when I asked him why he chose this image for his archive, he replied that "it is the best one I have ... it tells more about me than any other image" (Personal Interview). This is also the photograph that Charl would most often use if he had to share an image of himself with a public audience – it has become "the image" to identify him (ibid.). This was perhaps what initially baffled me – why would this image be invested with so much meaning if it seemed to communicate so little, or to do so in such a vague manner? When I look at this image, it feels as if I am standing at a distance, and I become aware of my own inability to see clearly.

It almost seems as if the image does not allow the eye to focus on its surface, which is perhaps why this photograph is so important to Charl. To a certain degree this image

speaks of his shyness, with his features just discernible, and his identity slightly masked by a muddle of pixels and his reflecting glasses that block out his eyes. For all its elusiveness, it also serves to corroborate his masculinity, as the person depicted in this picture may be slightly indistinct, but he still appears to be male. Perhaps then this is not an image that is so concerned about Charl as *an individual*, but more about Charl as a *man*. This image maintains a quality of aloofness, as it does not seem to allow for much intimacy between subject and viewer; yet it does fulfil its task of framing this subject as masculine.

#### 4.2.3 The Man in the Archive

While the visible archives of the participants all demonstrate how photography is used to reference their current (male) identities, these archives show divergence in terms of their visual recognition of the process of gender transitioning that led to these identities. While some of the archives place particular emphasis on the ability of the participants to pass as men, the ability of photography to make trans lives readable is also a key concern in some of the photographic selections. Concurrent discourses on passing as male and promoting trans visibility underlie these archives as they reflect varying responses to the question of whether the visibility of trans identities is a viable option for photographic archives that are produced for an outside audience.

The ability to pass (as male) within a photographic archive is particularly pronounced in Munir's and Charl's collections. Munir's visible archive presents a clearly delineated version of his life as a man, as he chooses not to make any visual reference to a pre-transition or transitioning subjectivity.<sup>159</sup> This archive commences after his first surgery and he chooses only to visualise himself once he has the ability to successfully pass as a man. His interpretation of a masculine, post-transition self is a central theme that recurs throughout his analysis of his archive. When discussing the communicative value of Figure B2, for example, Munir chooses to emphasise the ability of the image to convey a masculine version of self. The significance of this image lies, for Munir, in his ability to recognise and assert himself as a man – in his words: “that’s me – that’s a guy standing there because of the slacks and the shirt and the tie, and with a woman on my side. That definitely describes masculinity – I’m like a *man* standing there. Definitely” (Personal Interview, Munir's emphasis). Munir makes repeated reference to a feeling of happiness and contentment that pervades his experience of the image and the event that it portrays (*ibid.*). Many of

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<sup>159</sup> Such reference is made in his discussion of his ID photograph image, but it is not granted visual exposure in his personal archive. I return to this example in Chapter 4.3.

these emotions are attached to the “ease” and “comfort” (ibid.) with which he represented himself as male at the event. The certainty with which he identifies himself and the emotions attached to such a form of identification are thus ascribed to his ability to inhabit the space of ‘man’ convincingly and unambiguously.

At the same time this image also shows how the category of ‘man’ is interpreted, both in terms of appearance as well as a man’s perceived role towards a woman. In Figure B2 Munir’s status as a man is construed in terms of his relationship with the female subject that is also shown in the image. In Munir’s words, a sense of “admiration” underlies this depicted relationship (ibid.), and much of this admiration seems to pivot on what Munir perceives as the viewer and the female subject’s ability to recognise him as a man. Such a perspective is also echoed in Figure B3, where Munir assumes a central position in the picture by being flanked (and supported) by two female subjects. A degree of humour pervades his interpretation of this image and of his own presentation of masculinity, as he is aware that it entails an exaggerated performance of male and female stereotypes – of a tycoon-like, dominant male persona that is propped up by female characters. When describing this image, Munir refers to himself being represented “with women all over me” (ibid.). These words allude to an understanding of male subjectivity as something that has overt sexual connotations and as ‘irresistible’ to females who admire and crave such displays of masculinity. While the image is clearly set up as a humorous take on male and female stereotypes, much value is still invested by Munir in his ability to portray his own masculine role convincingly, and the presence of the two female subjects are pivotal to his exploration of the visual dimensions of this role.

Despite his knowledge of the constructed nature of the depicted scene with its typecast gender frameworks, the sense of playfulness that pervades this depiction should not be mistaken for irony, as Munir invests much importance in the image’s ability to capture a masculine self. In fact, Munir’s whole archive seems to be concerned with a process of charting his “progression” as male – be it in Figure B5, which is the first photograph that was taken after he had top-surgery; or Figure B4, which is also concerned with recording change (that is, masculinity as a form of change from a pre-transition, female subjectivity). Signs of progression – be it in the moustache that he is sporting in Figure B4, the hint of a masculine chest in Figure B5, or his female companions who endorse his display of masculinity in Figures B2 and B3 – are read in conjunction with and as support of an understanding of self that is emphatically orientated towards the male. As Munir’s treatment of these images reveals, the idea of ‘difference’ (from a pre-transition



appearance) is key to understanding them – as Munir explains, “I don’t just take pictures for the sake of taking pictures, it must really mean something. Maybe if I see that I’ve done something different to myself, I’ll take a picture” (Personal Interview).

Charl’s archive shows a similar predilection for enabling its subject to pass as a man. While his archive contains a photograph of a pre-transition self – see Figure A1 – this image is deliberately chosen for its ability to be read as an indicator of his latent masculinity. Charl places much importance on his ability to pass within everyday society (Personal Interview), and his archive reflects such a concern with not being read as trans. As passing is treated as an achievement and in some cases a necessity (*ibid.*), Charl’s emphasis on being read as a man resounds both in his contact with people in public spaces, as well as in his presentation of self within his photographic archive. This idea is echoed in Charl’s response to a question on how important it is for him to pass as male in everyday society:

It is very important. For that reason I always get worried when I do decide to shave, I get worried that they might see the feminine coming through. So as far as possible, I shave very seldom, because when you see the beard, you see a male ... Basically I stay in stealth, because I do need to be accepted. I don’t often wear casual clothes, because jeans are too unisex, I need to wear something that makes people immediately see me as a male. So people look at me and think that I am very formal, but actually I am not being formal, I’m just looking after myself. (Personal Interview)

In the case of both Charl’s and Munir’s archives, a fear of losing control over their body images is pervasive. By avoiding any slippage between (disparate) body images and their current bodily appearance, both these participants demonstrate a strong need to keep their current body image intact within their photographic selections. Knowledge of their status as trans men is disclosed only via narrative and not through the photographs themselves. If these archives were read in isolation – that is, without the support of their narrative explanations – the participants might very well have passed as men, as only the text provides overt reference to their status as trans men.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> In this case the term ‘text’ refers both to the participants’ transcribed discussions of their photographic selections, as well as this study as a text that frames a certain knowledge of these participants as trans. With regards to the latter, the role of this study as a framing device cannot be underestimated as, at the very outset of this investigation, the reader is already confronted with specific knowledge of the participants – a knowledge that precedes the reader’s contact with their photographic archives. By being placed in this thesis, the photographs become symbols of how the *idea* of passing is facilitated, while they simultaneously lose their power to make the participants pass in the eyes of the reader.

The capacity of text to frame a subject as trans is displayed in two different images that Charl chose for his archive – both Figures C4 and C5 are photographs that were published with accompanying text that allude to the trans status of the subject that is depicted. Both images serve an illustrative purpose insofar as they provide visual reference to some type of, or individual case for, trans life – while Figure C4 appeared in a magazine article that suggests the general outlines of a precarious life, Figure C5, which appeared in the book *Trans*, provides a more detailed account of how a specific trans life is lived. In both these images text serves the explicit function of drawing attention to the status of the subject (of Charl) as trans – a knowledge that the images cannot in themselves secure, but which is framed as such by the media through which these images were circulated and archived.

The photograph's ability to facilitate trans visibility is on the other hand firmly emphasised in Robert's photographic selection where several images testify to his status as a trans man. Robert's decision to include such images reveals a different orientation towards the visual – photographs of trans subjects are important for his advocacy work and he considers them to be empowering insofar as they create awareness about trans-related issues (Personal Interview). When asked whether he regards photography as an empowering medium insofar as it can create awareness about trans lives, Robert replies:

I think it is key and that it is often underestimated. I get confused in my work because there isn't any funding available to me to do more photographic work, but there is funding to write another bloody report. With those photographs in the *Trans* book I have done more work than with anything else. When people out there see photographs, they realise 'oh, they don't have long teeth and tails' ... it is all that I have as antidote to Jerry Springer and those types of depictions. (ibid.)

Robert's work as a trans activist corroborates such a perspective – while Charl does not see himself as an activist and shies away from forms of public exposure, Robert's archive corresponds to his decision to “consciously transition in public” (Personal Interview) in order to create trans awareness. Consequently, Robert uses images that capture certain aspects of his transition to create a “safe space” for other trans men – a space of recognition and protection (ibid.).

In line with such a concern for creating awareness, Robert's archive is slanted towards a documentary use of photography, as he sees his collection as a place in which he can record (and give recognition to) the process that informed his gender transition. To chart this process, two positions are specifically highlighted in his collection. These positions are referenced with two images – Figures A1 and A2 – which are used to show his gender transition by means of contrast. Figure A1, which Robert calls the “honeymoon” photograph, is the first image that he chose for his archive and he emphasises its value by describing it as a “milestone photograph” (Personal Interview). The value that Robert attaches to this image is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the way that the image is displayed and archived. According to Robert, this is the only framed photograph that he has in his home, and it stands next to his bed (Personal Interview). It therefore occupies a central and coveted position in his everyday living environment. To Robert, “it is a little kitsch when people place framed pictures of themselves throughout their home, but this is an image of which I will never tire” (ibid.), hence its prominent display.

When discussing this image, he specifically highlights his own role in setting this image up in such a way that the romantic nature of the event is accentuated. To Robert, the significance of this image lies in the “constructed truth” that it contains. Part of the reason why Robert appreciates this image is his ability to recognise different frames of reality that informs its meaning – he knows why and how this image was constructed, and which realities are occluded by the frames that he uses. For example, he knows that, despite the affection that this picture alludes to, his wife was “grumpy” and not in the mood for a romantic photograph (Personal Interview). To Robert, this image is “filled with irony” (ibid.) and, for all the value that he invests in the romantic aspects that surround this image, part of its personal worth is based on the conflicting realities that he managed to control and manipulate in his role as photographer. His role as author is strongly pronounced as the construction and interpretation of this image is based on an idea of having inside knowledge – of knowing what ‘really’ happened when the photograph was taken, and how a different reality is created in the photograph. The photograph becomes, in his words, “representative of *the moment*” (ibid., Robert's emphasis); yet this is a moment that is based on a suggested reality and an implied reading of the image.

Part of its suggestive value also depends upon the image's ability to frame him as masculine – as Robert contends, such honeymoon images are intricately linked to a display of masculinity as they allude to the consummation of his role as a man. In this regard Figure A1 serves a socio-symbolic function, as it references an initiation into his role as

husband and, by implication, as man. This demonstration of his masculinity is directly geared towards a future audience – as Robert argues, this is an image that “you will display ... and you will show ... to your children” (Personal Interview). In terms of the anticipated audience of this image, Robert regards it as a photograph that he will share with anyone – the image is “all-appealing” and its “story” (its representation of the “romantic” moment between him and his wife) can be shared with any person who is interested (*ibid.*). In addition to such a general audience, Robert also alludes to children as a possible result of, and future audience for, the union that is depicted between him and his wife. This reference accentuates an idea of domestic masculinity – of Robert’s role as husband and, possibly, as father – that bolsters and is drawn from the romance of the depicted honeymoon scene. Its symbolic value as a sign of his masculinity is thus based on its ability to function in a public archive (of being shared with a viewer) and on an anticipated audience’s reading of this image as a sign of such masculinity. The historic value of this image is predicted and, to a large degree, projected upon the future.<sup>161</sup>

Following on this image, Figure A2 acts as a visual counterpoint to the life sketched in the honeymoon photograph. This image, which is called the “before” photograph, is also described as a “constructed” image (Personal Interview); however, in contrast to the honeymoon photograph, the constructed nature of this image is centred on a now-unrecognisable self that is presented to the camera. The heterosexual woman that is purportedly captured in this photograph is described as a persona (or a body) with which Robert can no longer identify, precisely because she represents a pre-transition part of him that, in his opinion, complied with the normative expectations of society. While both Figures A1 and A2 are regarded as “constructed” to the extent that Robert – as subject and photographer – had a clear idea as to the ‘reality’ that he wanted each image to frame, the so-called ‘constructedness’ of the former image is described as “ironic”, while, in the latter image modes of construction are treated as a “lie” (*ibid.*). This viewpoint is centred on a notion of ‘truthfulness’ that pervades forms of identity construction and framing – in this case, the post-transition subject is treated as honest in his construction of masculinity precisely because he is in-the-know and presenting himself as he apparently wishes to. In contrast, the pre-transition subject is framed as untrustworthy and unrepresentative, precisely because she is forced to comply with normative codes of gender and sexuality. The degrees of truthfulness that are (retrospectively) invested in the images differ predominantly on the basis of the gender frames that are adopted in each

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<sup>161</sup> In his feedback on the thesis Robert wrote in the margin of this paragraph that such images act as a “shield [to] protect you from constant consciousness of your vulnerability, to make you feel safe” (Personal Feedback).

image and the way in which Robert conceives of his relationship to these frames. Accordingly, the status of “constructed truth” (ibid.) that is granted to the honeymoon photograph is to a large degree based on the masculinity that it depicts, while the pre-transition image as constructed “lie” acts as a visual antithesis on the basis of the femininity that it alludes to.

Even though these images are afforded different levels of truthfulness in terms of what they represent to Robert as a post-transition subject, they both serve a significant function in terms of raising awareness of the empowerment of both Robert and Adele as subjects, albeit in very different ways. In Figure A1 Robert appears in control, as the image is set on demonstrating his hold over his own masculinity. By sharing this image with an audience, Robert seems intent on raising the spectator’s awareness of the degree to which he is recognised and accepted as a man. Figure A2 covers a different side of Robert’s life, a side that he shares only with a very carefully selected audience; yet he does share it with a specific purpose. When asked during an interview to whom he would show this image, Robert explained that he strategically uses this image when he has to deal with a “particularly tough crowd” because:

They often have contrived ideas of transsexuals being pathetic people that can’t express gender, so it illustrates the performance. It’s like, I’m a guy now who lives a successful life and I am not a burden to society, and I was the same as a woman, but I just didn’t feel connected performing that identity. (Personal Interview).

This image is thus considered useful for demonstrating that it was not a lack of power that drove Robert to become a man, but a sense of not feeling connected to a particular (female) identity. For all the distance that Robert creates in his presentation of Figures A1 and A2, a link is still maintained in terms of his experience of empowerment in order to demonstrate his relationship to society. This narrative suggests that as both Robert and Adele a life was lived convincingly and successfully.

In Charl’s and Munir’s archives a visual recollection of trans emerges that is strongly orientated towards reiterating their current identities as men, rather than it being a case that their collections are used to reference the process of transitioning itself. Robert’s archive proves to be the exception – while the idea of transitioning is not referenced in the photographs that Munir and Charl chose, Robert specifically uses photographs to reinforce an idea of his current identity and body as part of some process. In Robert’s selection

Figures A1 and A2 provide an account that seems to allude to the existence of two different bodies and identities in which the one leads to the other, while they also exist in stark opposition to one another. On a narrative level this opposition is, however, undercut by Robert's insistence on a degree of fluidity that is still part of his masculine identity.<sup>162</sup> Meanwhile, Figures A4 and A5 provide visual points of reference to suggest that a physical process marked his transition, as they offer small but significant signs that link one body/existence to another. Both images were taken after Robert's top-surgery – Figure A4 directly after this operation and Figure A5 shows him as he appeared for the first time in public without a shirt. When discussing these images, Robert highlights the fact that both offer strategic references to his surgery, especially as they show the scars on his chest that mark him as someone who has had some form of sex reassignment surgery. These two images thus offer some indication of his current identity as shaped by a bodily process of transitioning.

In Figure A4 Robert deliberately draws attention to the scars on his chest that in effect mark him as trans. The setting of this photograph (a hospital room), as well as the time when it was taken (directly after the top-surgery when the bandages could be removed) denotes an intimacy in the fact that the knowledge is shared – this part of Robert's process in transitioning is, in his opinion, not just shareable with anyone, but requires a special audience who should know how to read it correctly. The suitability of an audience is determined by their presumed capacity for understanding and, importantly, for reading beyond the medical gaze that this photograph replicates. To a large degree this image draws on and responds to the medical discourses that have framed trans lives – particularly earlier medical models of 'transsexuality' that framed it as a pathological condition – and a special knowledge is needed on the part of the viewer to read such frames against the grain of their assumed neutrality and authority. While trans bodies were often captured in photographs to furnish scientific 'evidence' of psychological and corporeal abnormality (Meyerowitz 2002), this image displaces (in part) the bleak, depersonalising medical gaze that has long grazed such bodies.

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<sup>162</sup> During the interviews Robert made repeated reference to his identity as both resolved and fluid, as situated *in-between* – be it between the past, the present and the future, between history and creative (re)writing, or between masculinity and femininity (Personal Interview). However, such seeming ambivalence should not, according to Robert, be seen as forms of "confusion" or confliction (*ibid.*), as he sees himself as in control of his expression of identity. Robert thus highlights a sense of agency that pervades his experience of archiving and authorising himself; yet such forms of expression are not treated as clear-cut examples of self-ascribed power, but as something that emerges at the intersection of the self and the social – an idea that I return to later in this section.

This process of displacement does not mean that the authority of the medical gaze is completely dislocated from the trans body; in the case of this image the physical process of transitioning is emphasised as a profoundly medical one, and the camera facilitates a gaze that renders the trans body visible as it emerges through (or rather, just after) surgery. As Robert's treatment of this image suggests, the physical traces that medical discourses leave on a trans body cannot be denied, yet these traces have to be supplemented with an understanding of the emotional value of the process of transitioning. Robert thus tries to (re)direct the gaze of the camera/viewer in order frame his body as it is simultaneously shaped by medical and psychological processes through which he emerges as male, while he also emphasises the physical presence of his body as an organism through which he is made present, through which he is *here*, as his body language seems to suggest. This is a wilfully exaggerated performance of citing the body, and a degree of humour pervades Robert's reading of this performance. When asked during an interview whether he could think of any specific words to describe this image, Robert laughingly replies with "the Robert Hamblin Show", which he then changes to the more severe "gross", "perfect" and "cool" (Personal Interview). Later in our discussion, Robert explains his initial choice of "the Robert Hamblin Show" when he comments on the degree to which this image was constructed for a specific audience that he had in mind:

I really felt that there was such an enormous gaze on me, everybody's big fear that they are going to *cut your body*, and so I wanted to show, well look at me, I'm all cut and I'm fine. You can see how I pull my hands towards myself, I'm not defensive, I'm like, this is me. (ibid., Robert's emphasis)

For Robert, to redirect the photographic gaze means to highlight its value as a simultaneously informative and affective document; yet as such values also underscore the medical gaze that has often made trans men the subject of scientific scrutiny and fascination, this image has to be informative and affective in a specific way. His performance of joyfulness (of inviting and affirming the gaze of the viewer) is important in this regard, not for radically shifting the gaze away from the trans body, but for urging the mind behind the gaze to understand him as a relieved human being.

The viewers are directly implicated in the process of looking, as they are invited to share in a certain experience of trans that is, in Robert's words, "joyful" (Personal Interview). However, such an understanding of the role of the viewers and their own frames of reference when interpreting this image evokes in Robert a fear that people might "misuse" (or misunderstand) this image (ibid.). Robert's fear that people might use an image to

convey a “different meaning” (ibid.) shows that he has a definite idea as to what this image *should* convey; nonetheless he is also aware that it could be read in numerous other ways. This concern seems to be based on the fact that an uninformed audience might read it as an unambiguous sign of abjection – they might stop at reading this image as a fixation upon a scarred body, rather than understanding its suggestion of relief and resolve. Robert is acutely aware of how this representation of his body can be read, as he contends:

This is a disgusting image, you can see my bloodstained chest and the terrible scars that were still uneven at the time, and there are still pipes coming out of my body, and there are wet spots on the sheet, so it is a little creepy. But whenever I do presentations I always tell people that this was the happiest time in my life, and the time when I was most relieved. I am relieved because I had this massive anxiety over the intellectual meaning of doing it – of altering your body with a knife, or actually of allowing someone else to do it. And it was great, I had no bad feelings afterwards, and I was so glad when I looked down [at my chest], and my soul experienced this feeling of relief. I didn’t feel any guilt, and I didn’t worry that it was ugly – it was great. (ibid.)

The frame of abjection that Robert draws on when discussing his own body provides but a starting point when dealing with the corporeal visibility of transness – in Robert’s view, it is a frame of reference that must be supplemented and surpassed with a reading of his body as something that is completed and fixed. The idea of ‘fixing’ (which is in this case equated with the practice of transitioning) is referenced as a completed process, as the body now only bears the scars of a procedure that has run its course. The culmination of this process is highlighted in Figure A5, the “public chest” photograph, where Robert appears in public without a shirt for the first time. For Robert, this image is strategically taken as it transcends a view of trans (and, in particular, of sex reassignment surgery) as pathological. It focuses on his healed chest, and the scars that are still visible are, in Robert’s opinion, transcended by the joyfulness of the occasion. Displaying these scars can also be read as aligned with Robert’s work as a trans activist, as they are specifically presented in a public space so as to imbue transness (and the bodily processes that might be involved with it) with associations of the ‘everyday’ and the ‘celebratory’.<sup>163</sup> By using this image to show

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<sup>163</sup> The setting of this photograph contributes largely to such associations, and while Figure A4 is set in a hospital room, Figure A5 shows Robert at the beach. The surroundings of the latter image call to mind associations of the everyday, the public and of leisure, all of which contribute to the ‘ordinariness’ of the scene.



other trans men “that one can have a nice surgery” (ibid.), the scars become deliberate signs of a process that has culminated in the current identity and body of a male subject.

In this context displays of trans corporeality thus seem to be predominantly concerned with showing the body as something that *has transitioned* and not necessarily as something that *is transitioning*. In Robert’s photographic selection various points of reference are drawn upon in order to make some aspects of a trans life discernible, and divergence underlines these nodes in terms of time and context; nonetheless, they provide a dialectic view of sorts as they are cited to create a view of such a life as something that has progressed and been consolidated (at the cost of those aspects/features of self that were transformed or discarded or ambiguous). In this regard these photographs seem to substantiate a certain account of trans masculinity as a real, felt experience, as something that has left a tangible mark on the body. At the same time the significance of these photographs in Robert’s life is highly dependent on their being archived in a specific way – to be shared, framed and reiterated in such a way that he experiences some control over the meaning of the image.

While Robert’s archive places much more emphasis on trans visibility than Charl’s and Munir’s archives do, this does not necessarily mean that forms of trans exposure are always visible and public. The carefully selected audience to whom Robert chooses to disclose some of his images (specifically those that reveal his status as a trans man, such as Figures A2, A4 and A5), demonstrates trans visibility to be a strongly regulated, context-specific procedure of divulging a knowledge of self to an other. This idea is clearly demonstrated in the case of Figure A5, as two copies of this image form part of Robert’s archive, the one being a larger digital image, and the other being a smaller copy that is strategically scaled down in order to reduce the amount of detail that can be seen in the image. In the latter image Robert deliberately chose to limit the noticeability of his scars so as to produce an image that he would be more comfortable sharing online, for example, and with a larger public audience. As Robert argues, the reason why he chose to reduce the size of this image was:

Because people are morbidly curious about scars and stuff like that, and on the high-res picture you can see it. And I don’t want people to exploit that. I see how people use such images on the internet, it is an opportunity for them to make out as if we are fake, but I did want the public to see that I took that step, to show my body as if I am any other oke on the beach. (Personal Interview)

The digital nature of this image allows him to edit and scale it (and thus to vary its degrees of exposure), while it also allows him to share and archive it in a certain way. In this case trans visibility emerges as a continuous process of disclosure – something that cannot be finalised, but that is constantly reiterated depending on the context within which it circulates.<sup>164</sup> To visualise a trans identity (or some aspect related to the process of transitioning) cannot be conceived of as a finalised act, as a way of disclosing oneself (and of publicly inhabiting the category of ‘trans’) once and for all.

While photographs provide a reiterative framework for tracing the process of transitioning, they only manage to suggest some moments in this process (if they do suggest any moment at all). In the case of Munir’s and Charl’s archives, the ability to ‘know’ transness through photography is completely refuted by their decision not to use images for referencing the process of transitioning, but rather focusing their archive on their appearance as men (and not necessarily as trans men). In Robert’s archive his status as a trans man is referenced to the degree that he shows himself as a man who has just transitioned, and his representation of transness is anchored by the overriding masculinity of his post-transition appearance. The ability of photographs to frame (and by implication to ‘know’) the bodies of these research participants as trans is thus based on a system of partial visibility. To pass successfully as a man is sometimes a difficult process, their accounts show, and to come out selectively can be a way of ensuring that a knowledge of their transness does not disrupt their present lives as men. Even to Robert, who arguably demonstrates the highest degree of openness in presenting an account of transness, be it in his life or in his archive, his ability to pass as a man is central to the way in which he presents and conceives himself. This is, however, not always an easy decision – when asked during an interview how important it is for him to pass as male in everyday society, Robert poignantly replies:

Painfully much. I don’t want to feel this way, but I do. I’m so conscious of it, and then it is like, I shouldn’t feel this way, I should contest this. And I can deconstruct it in the moment. But in the end, it is very important to me. It is a decision, this is who I am, and *I need you to see me this way*. At some point you have to say “shhht” to the feminists and “shhht” to the feminist bitch in yourself, and just be. (Personal Interview, my emphasis)

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<sup>164</sup> Eve Sedgwick’s (1990) formulation of disclosure is particularly relevant in this context as she problematises the notion of ‘coming out’ as a finalised act. In the context of this study the condition of ‘being’ trans is emphasised in the lives of the three participants as something that is neither completely open and visible, nor totally secret, but rather as something that is wrought by continuous processes of concealment and exposure.

#### 4.2.4 Recollecting Vulnerability

The frames that determine the ability of these participants to be perceived as trans men, or for that matter as men, point towards a complex system of intelligibility that underpins their presentation of a gendered self. From a Butlerian perspective, such attempts at trying to make a trans life intelligible depend on dynamic systems of apprehension and recognition in which a state of precariousness is granted different levels of perceptibility. According to Butler, apprehension can be understood as a “mode of knowing that is not yet recognition, or may remain irreducible to recognition” (Butler 2009a: 6), while intelligibility can be comprehended “as the general historical schema or schemas that establish domains of the knowable. This would constitute a dynamic field understood, at least initially, as an historical *a priori*” (ibid.). Schemas of intelligibility produce norms of recognisability and apprehension, yet this does not imply that all acts of knowing are acts of recognition (2009a: 7). As Butler maintains:

To say that a life is precarious requires not only that a life be apprehended as a life, but also that precariousness be an aspect of what is apprehended in what is living. Normatively construed, I am arguing that there ought to be a more inclusive and egalitarian way of recognising precariousness, and that this should take form as concrete social policy regarding such issues as shelter, work, food, medical care, and legal status. And yet, I am also insisting, in a way that might seem paradoxical, that precariousness itself cannot be properly recognised. It can be apprehended, taken in, encountered, and it can be presupposed by certain norms of recognition just as it can be refused by such norms. Indeed, there ought to be recognition of precariousness as a shared condition of human life ... but we ought not to think that the recognition of precariousness masters or captures or even fully cognises what it recognises. (2009a: 13)

This distinction between apprehension and recognition has important consequences when dealing with the visual accounts of self as presented by the three participants of this study. In order to be apprehended as precarious (which has relevance to these participants on a socio-political level), they have to visualise and make knowable their status as trans. However, if this knowledge is not shared, their sense of being precarious also diminishes and changes. For this reason these participants do not always seek to be apprehended as precarious (or as trans), but they rather wish to be recognised as men – the visual

reiteration of gender (and of masculinity, in particular) is thus related to ways in which these participants seek to become eligible for recognition.

When interpreting forms of photographic recollection, these participants identify a state of precarity as it is simultaneously exposed and induced by the visual representation of their lives. The process of transitioning and the ambivalent display of gender that it might contribute to, as well as the taking-up of 'trans men' as an identity category, is repeatedly framed by these participants as precarious (insofar as their experience of transsexuality mirrors Butler's conception of precarity as a socio-political condition of induced vulnerability). In terms of their interpretation of the process of transitioning, this sense of vulnerability attends the idea of transsexuality as a condition in which they run the risk of becoming unintelligible or misread because of an ambivalent reading of their gender. While a knowledge of the research participants as trans underlies the narrative accounts of self that were presented to this study, the degree to which such knowledge is granted a visual dimension differs tremendously – a difference that can, in part, be seen in the divergent conceptions amongst the participants about the ability of photography to render them less (or more) precarious.

One account of photography that emerges in the personal archives is an idea of the domain of the visual as instrumental for fighting vulnerability by creating awareness of trans lives – an idea that is particularly pronounced in Robert's archive, as he specifically highlights the role of photography for making some aspects of transness disclosable. Nonetheless, while such an archive may be orientated towards a display of trans as cause for celebration (with its associations of bringing 'release' and 'resolve' being an underlying principle of such a conception), it still operates at a level where 'being trans' is cast to some extent as being different. Transness is simultaneously underscored for the noticeable difference that it presents from cisgender bodies/identities, while its similarity to such bodies/identities (and specifically the discourses that classify such bodies/identities as 'normal') are also emphasised. Trans thus becomes an almost invisible visibility insofar as it can become unnoticeable unless attention is specifically and strategically drawn to it. In the case of Robert's archive, his decision to mobilise the category of 'trans man' for political reasons is based on a tactical consideration of his own relationship to cisgender discourses on the 'normal' – of how to negotiate a sense of similarity to these discourses, while still giving recognition to his sense of being different. Making the identity of 'trans man' visible thus seems to underlie a complex process of stabilising a sense of masculinity, while not

allowing the manner in which one inhabits and displays the category of 'man' to completely obscure the experience and signs of transness.

While such an understanding of the photographic is geared towards visualising transsexuality as a means to fight precarity, the framing of subjects as trans can also heighten their sense of being vulnerable, even if such forms of framing occur at a level where one is actually trying to fight the precariousness of these subjects. This is evident in Charl's archive, which reflects his view that being a trans man in South Africa is enmeshed with an experience of precariousness because of a lack of "space" (be it social, political, discursive and/or visual) to openly live his life (Personal Interview). As his experience of precarity is linked to a loss of control over the disclosure of his transness, photographs are carefully monitored for what they might reveal to a public audience.

While Charl's selection of photographs never in themselves frame him as trans, the way in which some of them are framed by the text that accompanies them, as well as the context within which they circulate, reveals his experience of trans disclosure as precarious to be contingent upon various factors. When comparing Figures C4 and C5, both of which were presented alongside text that casts him as trans, Charl's feeling of vulnerability seems to differ tremendously when interpreting each image. One of the overriding factors is the context within which each image was taken – while Figure C4 shows Charl at a time when he was still in stealth, Figure C5 is reflective of a period where he has "come out a little bit since working at *Genderdynamix*" (Personal Interview). However, this description does not imply a general progression from concealment to disclosure, or from feeling that his vulnerability is actually being diminished through such forms of disclosure, but rather from context-specific moments in which Charl feels more, or less, precarious in relation to photography.<sup>165</sup> In Charl's case it is not a matter of *becoming* more or less precarious, but his vulnerability rather emerges as contingent upon various contexts that intersect and overlap in the domain of the visual. The context within which a photograph is taken (with the contingencies of time, space, photographer and anticipated audience all playing a central role) and the context within which it actually circulates (that is the space within which the anticipated [the idea of] audience meets and breaks with an actual audience) are interrelated, as these contexts have a tremendous bearing on how precariousness is framed and perceived. In this sense photography can portray a subject at a time when they

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<sup>165</sup> When describing Figure C4, Charl draws attention to shifting degrees of exposure that mark his identity as a trans man (Personal Interview). While Charl's employment at *Genderdynamix* might have had an impact on him coming out of stealth, he is still "not fully out" (ibid.) and, in fact, he feels that he might be more in stealth now than he was a few years before.

experience a sense of precariousness in order to make such a condition apprehensible, while it also has an instrumental power for rendering a subject (more) precarious. Photography's power to frame lies in its ability to reproduce *as much as produce* modes for understanding a sense of being that is precarious, while its inability to always frame 'correctly' (in this context, to frame an understanding of a subject as precarious without aggravating such precariousness) is part of the reason why the medium is not always trusted by Charl. He is aware that these frames are context-dependent, and thus never completely controllable when photographs are shared with an audience.

Robert also shows an awareness that forms of trans visibility can be difficult to sustain in everyday society, and that the disclosure of transness is complicated by the context within which a trans subject finds himself/herself. As Robert argues:

There are a lot of layers, and it depends on where you are, and on what scale you are in socio-economic terms, and also how religious the people are amongst whom you find yourself ... I think that anything that isn't a mainstream construct is difficult to sustain. I am sitting here in an isolated room with you and currently I can only think of this context. But every day when I go out there I am questioned and contested the whole time, so it is an everyday struggle to find your way back to what you know, and to find the time to reflect. But I think that South Africa, on an idealistic level, has all these nice laws that, although they aren't always implemented, create consciousness and allow you to feel free enough to be yourself. And should someone confront you on a practical level, you have the tools to protect yourself, or to fight discrimination in society. So there are spaces where one is safe.  
(Personal Interview)

While Robert regards photography as a way to motivate for a culture of understanding for trans men, he is also aware that it may not always work for everybody. This idea resonates with Munir's interpretation of trans visibility, as he regards South Africa as a space where trans identities are an "open and visual aspect of our society" (Personal Interview). Forms of trans exposure can be important, according to Munir, insofar as it is comforting for trans people:

to see that there are others out there that are similar to you, that go through the same process. So it is definitely nice to see and hear of those things in the media, since it is a struggle for certain people to accept it. And I find that

once it is in the media, it is like guidance to those out there and it teaches them and even those that are not aware that this is what can happen that there is hope and there is help out there. I try to put as much out there as I can for people to gain the proper knowledge of what is happening. (ibid.)

As was the case in Robert's interpretation of photography, Munir also emphasises the educational dimension of trans exposure, as it can serve to 'enlighten' a public audience, both within a context of teaching an outside audience about trans-related issues, as well as helping people who are (possibly) trans to 'realise' their own identity.<sup>166</sup> Munir's support of the role of images of trans subjects to help "people to gain the proper knowledge" (ibid.) is, however, contradicted by his feeling that images can also cement a certain knowledge of transness that runs counter to their employment for trans advocacy. When asked whether he thought that photographs could be important for describing his identity, Munir contends that:

I used to believe that – I used to believe that you need to see a guy so that you can say that is a guy, you need to see that person before you can actually say it is a person, and at this point in time and from what I have learned through my process is no, you don't need visual imagery of anybody to be identified as a person. If that individual believes that he is a guy but looks like a female, we need to respect that that is a guy, because that is what the individual prefers to be called. But for legal circumstances I would say that it is important, but for us, now, it is not, or rather, for me it is not (Personal Interview).

For Munir, photographs have the ability to cement a certain idea of self – an ability that is important for trans identities as it can provide a means to oppose negative stereotypes (or general incomprehension) that might pervade the public reception of trans. Yet it remains a medium that is in effect complicit in producing stereotypical accounts of trans – be it for fighting ignorance or creating awareness. In Munir's account he makes an important distinction between a legal (or practical) use of such stereotypes, and a personal (or ideal) conception of identity. The latter seems to be largely tied to an ethical understanding of recognition – of the "need to respect" other human beings, however they might choose to

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<sup>166</sup> In this context 'to realise' would imply a process of bringing-about and of comprehending. Accordingly, the notion of 'creating awareness' is directed towards ways of fighting precarity by making it comprehensible to a cisgender audience, as well as facilitating forms of self-awareness amongst people who are possibly trans, but just not in the know.

identify (Personal Interview, my emphasis) – and not as something that is necessarily reflective of the status quo. On a political/bureaucratic level, the creation of an essentialised model for trans identity seems to be important for lobbying for rights and fighting discrimination, while on a personal and ideal level, such forms of essentialism would not be required.

To a certain degree all three archives operate through a pragmatic exercise of essentialism insofar as they serve to solidify and reiterate a certain knowledge of the participants as trans men in order to achieve specific (socio-political) goals. Gayatri Spivak's formulation of strategic essentialism provides a point of entry into such discourses on trans as intrinsically (and visibly) 'different' – for Spivak, certain modes of standardisation by minority groups can point towards a "*strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest*" (1996: 214, emphasis in original). As a context-specific strategy, a simplified, standardised account of self can perhaps serve the purpose of advancing a collective identity in order to fight the precariousness of a minority group. While such a group may comprise of highly divergent individuals (as is the case of the research participants of this study), forms of differentiation can be downplayed in order to produce a (seemingly) cohesive public image of trans men. In some regard, this exercise seems to constitute a form of branding – of creating a visual identity that can speak of their lives as trans men, or even just as men. Within such a visual model, images become exemplary of a certain accomplishment, which is in this case the attainment of a masculine identity.

Given the fact that all the participants form part of a trans advocacy group, they share (albeit to a different degree) a participation in the politics of identity as they are positioned within a collective body that endeavours to create conditions for the exposure and understanding for trans-related issues. The collective bearing of forms of exposure is reflected in their archives, as the idea of an "I" that is manifested in these collections is at once also reflective of the voice of a "we". These archives represent a shared interest in making some idea of trans knowable and, even though the features of trans that are highlighted in the respective archives may differ in crucial ways, they share a common strategy of translating the body (as a vehicle for a certain life) into discourse – into narrative and image – in order to lay claim to a sense of masculinity. With the purpose of asserting their intelligibility as human beings – that is, to become readable in social space and time (Butler 2009b: x-xi) – an idea of authorship as individual and shared is thus consolidated in these archives.



Through such an understanding of authorship and archiving, the process of making themselves known (or intelligible) emerges for Charl, Munir and Robert as a reiterative practice that occurs with, and in relation to, an other. The degree to which their identities are represented as 'fixed', 'finalised' or 'collective', for example, is highly influenced by this relationship. The way in which the participants are framed in their photographic archives might show an overwhelming compulsion towards reiterating a masculine self, yet such forms of disclosure are never completely stable or final – to use Butler's words "the job is never done 'once and for all'" (2009a: 4). To tell the story of oneself to an other is never a final, completely stable act, and it doesn't lead to a complete resolution of the multiplicity and conflict that is part of human subjectivity. Rather, that which is emphasised through the photographic archive's reiterative framework occurs alongside that which is limned, precisely because this framework's investment in making a subject comprehensible transpires at a point of forgetting an other version of self. As Butler maintains "if a life is produced according to the norms by which life is recognised, this implies neither that everything about a life is produced according to such norms nor that we must reject the idea that there is a remainder of 'life' – suspended and spectral – that limns and haunts every normative instance of life" (2009a: 7). This perspective corresponds to my interpretation of these participants' photographic archives, as such collections constitute frames of recognition that provide, in themselves, only partial accounts of identities and bodies, and that are "perpetually haunted" (ibid.) by that which remains unintelligible/untellable.

At the same time such forms of framing/forgetting never occur in isolation, but are bound to a subject's perceived place in society. As Robert aptly maintains, "you have power in certain situations, and you don't have power in other situations because of your position. My position is that I, like any other man, [am] less or more man than somebody else, so it depends on where I find myself" (Personal Interview). Being apprehended as trans, as a man, or, for that matter, as a human being, is always dependent on the context within which modes of being are manifested. Precariousness is also a condition that is shared (to varying degrees) by every human being – it is not limited to these participants, neither are their photographic archives the only way to understand their lives or redressing their vulnerability. If these archives can provide any knowledge of these men, it is always a knowledge that is partial and tied to a larger project of being human.

### 4.3 INVISIBLE ARCHIVES: ON BEING OUT OF SIGHT

*Photos that have been looked at often and long do not burn easily. As fixed picture stills, they are imprinted on the memory, and it is insignificant whether they can be presented as evidence. (Wolf 1979: 41)<sup>167</sup>*

While the previous section dealt specifically with an archival 'inside', with ways of rendering certain modes of living visible and intelligible, this section is concerned with accounts of self that somehow fall outside (or lie at the periphery of) the visible archives that were created by the participants of this study. In this part of my investigation I am concerned with those narratives that somehow escape or defy modes of visual representation – where an image of self has such power to traumatise and disrupt that it is denied spectatorship. These images occupy a liminal space, as their visual attributes and their presence within the photographic archives of the participants cannot always (or easily) be determined by a reader or viewer. The spectator is rendered blind, so to speak, once crossing the threshold between the visible and the invisible that marks these collections. Yet while these images may not be visible, they are to a large degree imaginable, and the narrative accounts of the participants provide a framework for somehow interpreting and grasping (albeit in a very vague and circumspect way) an idea/image of self.

The invisible dimensions of the participants' archives were framed by a question I posed to them, namely whether they could think of a particular photograph that they would not show to a public audience, but that they would be willing to discuss with me and, by implication, with the readers of this thesis. When I started conducting the interviews with the participants, I realised that their selection of photographs for this thesis was informed by a profound need to control the degree of access that a reader/viewer might have to their archives, and that some images that might be too sensitive to include as pictures might, perhaps, be tempered or renegotiated by transforming them into narrative. Providing the participants with an opportunity to choose how much they want to disclose to me and/or the reader and, in this process of disclosure, to draw attention to their ability to censor images/accounts of self was very important to this study. It highlights a particular role that these participants assume as archivists, authors and archons (that is, as collectors, narrators, interpreters and protectors) of their own collections. These roles hinge on an understanding of their archives as places where knowledge is not up for full disclosure, but rather

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<sup>167</sup> This is my own translation of Christa Wolf's text, which was originally published in German.

emerges in layers and fragments through concurrent processes of revelation and censorship. The power of photographs to frame (in this case, to divulge and incriminate) is thus brought into narrative and, to a degree, into question – an idea that repeatedly surfaces in my discussion of the invisible archives.

All the participants had particular images at hand or in mind that they could draw upon for such a discussion. Charl chose an image that frames him in a very feminine manner – it is a photograph that was taken when he was still at school, and it depicts him as a young girl attending a “debutante ball”, a local event that is similar to a school dance (Personal Interview).<sup>168</sup> This image fits into a period of his life that Charl identifies as particularly uncomfortable in terms of his relationship to the photographic medium:

I think when I was a teenager and you had these obligatory photo sessions with the family I did [feel uncomfortable], because I resented being photographed, and I was being forced to. I managed over the years to get rid of most of them [the photographs], because it is an embarrassment for me now to even look at those photographs. (Personal Interview)

The particular image that Charl chose to narrate falls within such a category of discomfiting images, and it is a photograph that Charl will “never show to anybody” (ibid.) – it is not shareable with a public audience and he chose not to show it to me. Despite its privacy, this image forms part of his mother’s photographic collection, and this photograph ‘belongs’ to his mother’s archive, and not to his own collection. Part of the reason why he feels uncomfortable with this image is that he doesn’t have direct control over its display and existence within his mother’s archive. While it is an image that she treasures for its recollection of a certain history, Charl feels embarrassed by the photograph’s ability to bring that past to the surface and the visual display and existence of this photograph are severely disturbing for Charl.

Munir chose to narrate a photograph that appears in his ‘old’ ID book – an image that portrays him at a time when he still identified as female.<sup>169</sup> Similar to the photograph that Charl chose, this image shows Munir in a very “feminine” manner (Personal Interview),<sup>170</sup> which is part of the reason why he doesn’t want to share this image with a public audience.

<sup>168</sup> See Addendum C for a transcript of this interview.

<sup>169</sup> See also Chapter 4.1 for a discussion of this image.

<sup>170</sup> See Addendum B for a transcript of this interview.

Munir did, however, show this image to me during his discussion in order to point out certain features – it served as a record for corroborating his viewpoint, but it was not up for public disclosure. The visual clues that he pointed out to me during his reading of the image served to accentuate his experience of being “split in two” at the time, of being caught between the female identity he was then “expected” to adopt in society, and his current (male) identity that was still dormant but invisibly present (ibid.). For Munir, this image is reflective of a change in identity and character as it acts as a visual counterpoint to the post-transition images that he chose for his visible archive – images in which he finds it easier to express himself if compared to this “unhappy”, “uncomfortable” pre-transition photograph (ibid.).

This particular photograph falls within a trope of images that Munir tries to distance himself from – images that show him before his transition and that he would not share with a public audience. These are images that Munir tries not to look back on, as they belong in his “past” and he wants “to leave ... [them] there”, even though he may not be able to forget them (Personal Interview). When asked what these images communicate to him, Munir explains:

I think it represents something and someone that I wasn't happy with. When I look at them they remind me not that I regret what I was before, but they remind me that in that time I wasn't happy. I don't know, it is not something that I can really put into words, when I look at them, they tell me something that I weren't happy with, that is why I say 'it' and 'someone', because 'it' is on there. 'It' represents that it's a female, so then 'it' makes me unhappy with the 'someone' that is there. (ibid.)

Munir's description of these images, and of the particular image that he chose to narrate, reveals this tension between absence and presence; of seeing a self, a “someone”, who is distant and remote because it is shrouded by “it”, by traces of femininity. This idea of simultaneous presence and absence is highlighted by his description of his ID photograph – when asked what this image communicates to him, Munir contends that:

It doesn't really say much besides the fact that I look very feminine in it, and because of my [Muslim] religion I am actually wearing a little scarf-thingy, which symbolises the feminine in my religion. And I still look quite young. But even here, when you look at my eyes, it's like I'm there but I'm also not there,

and that is what all my [pre-transition] pictures are basically like. (Personal Interview)

While Charl and Munir narrate images that show them as pre-transition subjects, Robert's selection is based on a range of photographs that depict him as he is transitioning. He identifies a general trope of representation that he is uncomfortable with, namely photographic depictions of him that are highly ambivalent in terms of their display of gender. These are images over which Robert wields extreme forms of "censorship" (Personal Interview)<sup>171</sup> – such images are severely restricted in terms of the audience to which they are shown and, if they somehow escape the control of Robert's personal archive, they are hunted down and wiped out. As Robert maintains:

Certain images are privileged. Nobody gets to own that. It is serious censorship that I have done – I had friends who still had old photos of me, and I pursued them. When I knew that somebody linked me to a photograph or somebody told me there was an old image of me on the internet, especially of the stage when I began transitioning and had not completed my physical transition, there was serious fights. I have lost several friends who posted old photographs of me, like on Facebook. But I mostly won the battle [to censor old images], and I destroyed them. (ibid.)

Within this trope of ambivalence Robert identified, showed and discussed a particular image that he found to be reflective of his process of transitioning. This image was discussed during a meeting in which Robert showed images that are not part of his everyday archive, neither are they used for advocacy work. These images are considered private, and he showed them to me and discussed them with me on a personal level, rather than it being a case of him proffering them for public knowledge. While this specific image forms part of a trope that he clearly identifies and shares (namely, that of gender ambivalence), the particulars of what this photograph depicts are not considered shareable with an audience. Both the image and its discussion are thus omitted from this thesis.

#### **4.3.1 On Archivisation and Authorship**

A degree of censorship pervades these collections as the participants use their position as archivists to determine and limit the degree of access a reader/viewer has to certain

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<sup>171</sup> See Addendum A for a transcript of this interview.

photographs. Foucault's definition of the archive as a law of what can be said can be extended to include, in this case, the archive as determined by laws of what *cannot* or *should not* be made visible, of the private that does not become the public, or the secret that does not always progress into the non-secret. The role of archiving can thus be comprehended in these collections as more than just a task of opening up and sharing knowledge, but it also encompasses a form of censorship that is a prerequisite for any form of recollection.<sup>172</sup> In this way these invisible archives emerge as spaces where knowledge is manifested in levels, with the participants acting as gatekeepers to strata of information. The occupation of this position demonstrates a sense of power that can be exerted over personal information – information that is regarded as severely disempowering by these participants if (and once) it eludes their control.

The question of who is in command of these archives has profound implications, both for the reader as audience, as well as for these participants as archivists. One might argue that this subchapter presents the archive at its most elusive as it seems to be situated largely outside of an audience's grasp, both in terms of understanding and of (be)holding an archival collection. By suppressing information, the participants draw attention to their archives as spaces where not all is shareable. Knowledge of these participants is not something that is to be gained from and distributed equally by these archives, but it is a privilege that is determined by the nature of the relationship between an archivist and an audience.<sup>173</sup> In these archives the participants enforce their right – the right of not having *to show* and/or not having *to say*.

Photographs are in effect denied a social existence in this part of the study – images are described and hinted at, but they are never included so as to become present and representable. However, while the reader might thus largely be denied the visual right of entry into these archives, this does not imply that society at large is refused access to such archival recollections. For example, the image that Charl chose to discuss in this thesis is shared with his mother, albeit involuntarily. In addition, this image was also shared with a public audience as it was reproduced in *The Argus* (a local newspaper) of 1974 or 1975 (Personal Interview). This image thus forms part of various archival structures, all of which

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<sup>172</sup> This was an issue that was repeatedly touched on in the previous subchapters where even a more public, visible conception of the archive was at play. To archive is, after all, to choose and to exclude.

<sup>173</sup> As a researcher, I fulfilled a dual role of audience and archivist – during the interviews I was the audience with whom narratives of self were shared, while my role as co-archivist also emerged in the process of editing, interpreting and representing information in conjunction with the participants. In addition, such shared roles reflect a position of acting as an intermediary between a reader/audience of this thesis and the participants as archivists, while these roles are also shaped by my own participating in acts of censorship – of deciding with the participants what to leave unsaid and/or invisible.

divulge different knowledges of Charl's identity – in his personal archive this image (and the gendered body it alludes to) is absent and erased; in this thesis as archive, the image is converted into narrative so as to give an account of an invisible archive; in his mother's archive the 'actual' image exists and is treasured for its allusion to a certain history/identity; and in a public archive this image exists as a newspaper photograph that documents a young girl who was crowned first princess at a debutante's ball. All of these archives exist in conjunction and overlap with one another as they intersect in the domain where a particular image fluctuates between absence and presence. Yet they cannot be amalgamated to form one collective system of knowledge and they cannot form a comprehensive or coherent body of knowledge, because they exist in varying degrees, or even different modes, of knowing and not-knowing. Sometimes that which is known in one archive is exactly that which is deliberately rendered unknowable in another. As this example suggests, not everything can be brought into knowledge and, for this reason, one cannot grasp these intersecting archives in their entirety.

In addition, such shared spaces of recollection are not necessarily voluntary – as both Charl and Munir's discussion of their chosen images reflects, this study may not require them to visually release certain images, yet disclosure can be initiated and demanded in other contexts. In Charl's case, his mother's possession of a particular image signals a form of ownership where she controls the mode of display and the audience of this photograph. For Munir, the existence of his chosen image within a state-sanctioned/demanded document also points towards a form of ownership and archiving that is not completely within his control. This image is demanded in certain public spaces, and the degree to which he can be in command of the exposure of this photograph is highly dependent on the context within which he finds himself. For both Charl and Munir the weight of these images is felt in their effect as they are laden with the possibility of leading to exposure.

Robert's chosen image may not necessarily be demanded by anyone; in fact, he establishes a strong sense of ownership over this image and other images that relate to the same period of time. In his case his control over the image and its circulation is also a matter of pride, as he identifies a sense of power in having the ability to choose with whom to share (that is, to show, not necessarily to give)<sup>174</sup> this image. While Robert is in possession of his

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<sup>174</sup> This is an important distinction, especially as it relates to this thesis as archive, as certain images were 'given' to me, either as electronic copies, or as physical photographs that were scanned in (such as those that form part of the visible archives), while others were only shown to me. While some photographs were considered to be 'safe' enough to be entrusted to my own archive, others were too sensitive for such a level of sharing, and my knowledge of them is based only on what I can recollect (or imagine).

chosen photograph and in charge of its location in his personal archive, Munir and Charl are caught in an uncomfortable situation where their photographs have escaped their control and broken the delineations of their personal/private archives by becoming public.

The act of sharing is, in the context of this study, also strongly fused with a task of translation – in these invisible archives, the act of translation becomes extremely important (and takes on a different dimension when compared to the visible archives), as the source, the photograph as original ‘text’, is not included. The undertaking of transforming and editing an image into narrative becomes, to a large degree, the only source of information that is offered to the reader/viewer of this study, if information is offered at all. The participants authorise themselves via images without including any such images to verify the supposed accuracy of their interpretations – they choose and interpret the images, and decide how these interpretations should be shared without granting an audience the benefit of conducting their own appraisal of the images. This process of translating images leaves the audience of this text with knowledge that is sedimented in layers, with some parts deliberately obscured, and information only filtering down as it is transferred from one person (or archive) to another. These invisible archives are thus largely constituted as an intersubjective process as the chosen photographs are, in effect, recreated by sharing and deleting information – what the reader is left with is an image that exists ‘in the mind’s eye’, an archive of the imagination. Memory is transformed, delayed and amended through narrative processes, which emphasise an understanding of these invisible archives as sites where photographs function as post-memories, as suggested outlines of recollection that bear only a vague remainder of their photographic source.

These acts of translation also represent a means of bodying forth information that is more concerned with telling than with showing, with feeling than with demonstrating. The participants experience the photographs as they translate them into words and this experience is, by the nature of such forms of translation, intimate. As Sontag asserts, to translate is a physical act (2003b: 340), it is a wilful exertion of control over something in order to transform it. This process of transformation implies, however, that information is not just carried over and carried on, but that something ends in the act of translation.<sup>175</sup> This idea resonates strongly in the invisible archives of the participants as these spaces can

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<sup>175</sup> Sontag argues that to be translated implies, in some sense, a way of dying (2003b: 339-340) – death is a form of translation, and something is killed (it changes bodies of comprehension) by translating it. Translation can thus be conceived of as centred on the notion of difference, Sontag maintains, as it is “a way of coping with, and ameliorating, and, yes, denying difference – even if ... it is also a way of asserting differentness” (2003b: 339).



be regarded as frontiers where the translation of knowledge is enacted in such a way that the end, the extremity of the act of translation, is suggested. The reader is left with an idea that translation has occurred; that an act (perhaps somewhat similar to Derrida's archive fever, that fire that always rages in the archive) has already taken place, and has left some residue behind.

#### 4.3.2 On Photography and Subjectivity

The evidential bearing of the archive, as well as of photography, is severely unsettled in this context, as their potential for instability and a largely imaginary existence is induced. In the case of these invisible archives, the intangibility and elusiveness of their holdings undermine their ability to recollect through substantiation (that is, to be a foundation of that which is lucid and transparent and real). These archives' function of safeguarding their holdings is complicated as the actual material they are supposed to protect is, in some respects, immaterial, indescribable or hard to get hold of. In addition, a profound archiviolithic<sup>176</sup> force also marks these archives as they operate at a place where their function of recollection works, in effect, by referencing a particular knowledge of self as forgettable, or even of actively rendering that knowledge unintelligible. In this case, *to forget* is an act, not a passive state of having lost, but rather of making something obsolete. For example, while a particular (feminine) identity might be recounted by the participants as something that has been left behind, the process of talking about such an identity/life is also concerned with explaining it as something that is, in retrospect, almost unimaginable or unthinkable. For this reason these invisible archives cannot be known, precisely because they function at a level where they are fraught with destruction, loss and expendability – by recollecting the unthinkable. Robert's invisible archive is created through a process in which images were deliberately destroyed, Charl's archive is characterised by images that tend to disappear, while Munir describes his invisible archive as a temporary space where images can be replaced by better substitutes. What is thus preserved in these archives is a memory of absence, of something that cannot (or should not) be known anymore. However, some trace remains, albeit a vague suggestion of loss and extinguishment.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> I draw on a Derridean understanding of this term in order to highlight the archive as a place where memories are, so to speak, broken down and lost through the act of translation (1995).

<sup>177</sup> As Paul Ricoeur argues, "forgetting has ... an active side linked to the process of recollecting, as a search aiming at the recovery of lost memories, of memories which are not actually blurred out, but only made unavailable ... we *forget less than we think and fear*" (2003: 8, my emphasis).

Photography plays a complicated role in these modes of recollection as its referential basis is simultaneously underscored and undermined in these invisible archives. While photography's evidential value (in particular, its purported ability to authenticate and authorise a certain version of self) is emphasised by the participants, it can only be *assumed* by the reader. It is precisely because these images are afforded much value as indexical markers of (a) reality that they are treated with such caution by the participants – these photographs are not included as their power to petrify and reiterate an identity is considered to be so overwhelming that they are rather suppressed and made invisible. The impact and weight of these images (or the *idea* of these images) are thus accentuated by the participants, who treat them as possibly dangerous for the reality that these photographs frame. In this case a 'lack' of information on these images (be it visual and/or textual) denotes their importance to the participants, rather than the opposite.

This impression of photography resonates strongly with Barthes's own understanding of the medium, particularly with regards to his treatment of irreproducible images. When Barthes introduces the Winter Garden photograph in *Camera Lucida* (1981) to the reader, he argues that his decision not to reproduce the image in this book is based on the reader's lack of understanding of what the image means to him. For Barthes, this photograph "only exists for me. For you [the reader], it would be nothing but an indifferent picture" (1981: 73). Barthes thus assumes and affirms a special relationship between himself and this photograph – a relationship that would be disturbed or misunderstood by an outside audience once the image is made visible. Such a relationship is also reflected in the case of the research participants and their invisible archives, where the choice not to reproduce an image speaks of a specific attitude towards an outside spectator/reader. In this context it is not necessarily a case of anticipating a general ignorance (of trans life, for example) on the part of the audience, but a belief that a reader cannot know *exactly* what these images might mean to their holders.<sup>178</sup> What they read in their photographs cannot be assured once the images are shown, the participants' stance seems to suggest. Along these lines, sight is equated with control – to see a photograph is to keep it, even if it is only in memory. In a manner of speaking, the viewer is not allowed to *keep an eye* on an image, to *take it in*, or to *(be)hold* it.

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<sup>178</sup> It is important to note that such anticipation of a future audience, of a reader of this text/archive, is to some degree based on a process of stereotyping, both on the part of the participants and myself. This text was produced with a general outline of an audience in mind, yet the specific readers of this text/archive cannot be fully determined in advance. The lack of control over and knowledge of a particular reader plays a large role in how knowledge is shared in these archives, and an awareness (and imagining) of a faceless audience always pervaded this project.

The only 'proof' offered to the reader as to the existence of these images is narrative accounts, such as those offered by Charl and Munir, while in Robert's case neither image nor narrative is presented as corroboration of the existence of his invisible archive, but only a brief outline (a trope of sorts) is produced of what this image might *possibly* refer to. For Charl and Munir in particular, text provides the opportunity to support and 'contain' an image – it speaks of striving to make an image more 'safe' by framing its meaning, and of trying to establishing a mode for reading (or in this case imagining) it appropriately. When dealing with the Winter Garden photograph, Barthes specifically draws on text because the purported ability of photography to 'authenticate' presence could overshadow his own interpretation of an image – an interpretation that he holds more dear than the reader's knowledge of the 'real'.<sup>179</sup> Like Barthes, some of the participants of this study find solace in text when dealing with certain affecting and/or disturbing photographs precisely because text is story bound (it is, in the case of narrative, more malleable and amendable), and perhaps not so fiercely marked with assumptions of authenticity. For Charl and Munir in particular, whose control over a public audience's exposure to their chosen image is in some contexts quite limited, their invisible archives provide them with the opportunity to use narrative as a means of directing the reader's blind gaze and of framing a response to these suggested images. The audience is asked to imagine a picture by using the clues provided by the participants – clues that are already intricately enmeshed with these participants' own interpretation of their images as it emerges through their narratives. In this way the audience is thus left with a mental picture that is both an intersubjective proposal on *how* to see, as well as a plea for imagining a life in a certain way. The gaze of the audience is thus redirected towards an imaginative, spectral understanding of photographic vision as something that haunts the human subject, but that is also haunted by its own failure to penetrate and reveal. The idea of photographic vision thus remains embedded in these invisible archives, as images are in effect conjured through narrative at the very place where they lose their visibility.

A narrative process of intimating an image is also marked by varying degrees of emphasis that are placed on its visual features and its meaning to the participants – some aspects of an image are strongly accentuated and take precedence when such an image is translated

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<sup>179</sup> For Barthes text provides an apt way for reframing the referential assumption that marks the photographic medium – to be confronted with a photograph (according to Barthes) one would be hard-pressed to gainsay its value of authentication while, in contrast, writing cannot give him this "certainty" (1981: 85). As he maintains "it is the misfortune (but perhaps also the voluptuous pleasure) of language not to be able to authenticate itself" (ibid.).

into narrative. When Charl talks about what this photograph communicates to him, he highlights that:

It tells me how you, especially when you are a kid, would do what your mother tells you – I don't know if it is in all families that way, but in my family certainly you do what your mother says, whether you like it or not. I didn't like it, but there was nothing I could do about it. I don't care how many people tell you [that] you could have said no, you can't say no, not in our family anyway. So, I get embarrassed when I see it. It should have been a nice photograph, it's with my mom and dad, and if it had been any different, it would have been seen as a very nice photograph. (Personal Interview)

In Charl's discussion of his chosen photograph, the context within which it was produced overrides the particularities of the image – instead of describing the image in detail, Charl rather chooses to focus on his family's influence on him, and the way in which this influence is manifested in the photograph's production and display. His narrative account thus focuses on the social and archival dimensions of this image as its invisibility in this thesis/archive partly rests on its compulsory existence in other collections. Charl recalls this image from memory and his recollection is predominately concerned with spaces where this image continues to be visible, and situations that played an indelible role in making this such an affecting image. His account also reveals a strong sentiment that this image *could have been different*, that it need not have framed a traumatic experience, if only he had not been forced to publicly perform an overtly feminine role.

Munir's account also emphasises his chosen photograph as representative of forced representation – as an “expected” (and not a voluntary) mode of visualisation (Personal Interview). In his narrative account much more emphasis is placed on specific detail – on features (such as clothes and in particular a Muslim headscarf) in which a pre-transition femininity can be linked to the pressure that he experienced from society and from his family to be (a certain type of) woman.<sup>180</sup> By describing his life as “split in two” (ibid.), these details serve as counterpoints to which his present identity can be measured. In his interpretation of a pre-transition self, Munir's feminine appearance is invested with feelings of awkwardness, confusion and of being coerced. When asked to describe this image, Munir uses the words “unhappy, feminine, confused” (Personal Interview) to give expression

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<sup>180</sup> In his discussion religious codes of gender are specifically highlighted for the immense pressure they exerted on his appearance and on his life in general. Such codes are thus cited for the influence they had on a particular type of femininity in which Munir felt subordinated and constricted.

to the one side of his experience – a side that he links to his pre-transition existence. These words and the visual residue that he identifies serve as symbolic confirmation of his compliance with certain normative (religious, gender) codes that, in retrospect, caused him much discontent and against which he can give expression to his current feelings of happiness and openness – of moving into a framework (a code of gender) that ‘fits him’, so to speak, more comfortably.

In both Munir’s and Charl’s narrative accounts an idea of self is bodied forth precisely because a photographic depiction of the body could disrupt their current idea/presentation of self. While they do give recognition in their narratives to the way in which their chosen photographs could frame them as trans, a distinction is drawn between *showing* a pre-transition body and *talking about* a pre-transition life. In these narrative accounts it seems as if the way in which they choose to represent themselves can take precedence over the particularities of the body precisely because the body *as it was then* is not immediately visible. The photograph is not allowed to fill the sight with force, neither to freeze the body for a viewer, but the narrative takes priority in monitoring the amount of detail that is disclosed to an audience. Through narrative, issues can thus be carefully skirted or dwelled upon when the participants recount their stories. Yet, even though these images are kept out of sight, they are not kept out of mind – they may change in archival format, but they are still subject to bearing knowledge of some sorts. Photographs do not always have to be seen to be known.

#### **4.3.3 The Human in the Archive**

Part of a process of reflecting on the content of these invisible archives and the manner in which they are presented by Robert, Charl and Munir is an acknowledgement that silence is on occasion the only way in which to respond to the vulnerability of the body – that it is not always possible (or feasible) to share a visual or *textual* account of self. Sometimes even narrative can be too much. Robert’s choice to share an image and a narrative in confidence point towards an understanding that not everything has to be taken into account, and that a study of this nature has to be sensitive towards spaces where a photographic archive cannot even be converted into a more ‘manageable’ (i.e. textual) format. In his invisible archive the personal is the private, and a private archive cannot be recollected in this thesis – it is impossible to comprehend through representation or description that which is supposed to be unknowable to an outside audience. Robert might grant the reader a vague outline of what this private archive might relate to (in terms of it

being “ambivalent”), yet, such an intimation is left to the imagination of the reader who cannot *know*, but can only *presume* the content, scope and actual existence of this archive. Robert is, however, acutely aware that even to suggest that an image has been censored may lead to the reader conjuring images of what could have been so incriminating that it is not included. In order to limit the open-endedness of this trope of the unvisualisable, Robert proffers a description of ambivalence that underlie some of the images that were taken during his gender transition. In this way Robert also relinquishes a sense of control, as he releases his private archive to the imagination.

The various omissions that are conspicuous in the participants’ archives demonstrate a particular attitude towards photographic and narrative accounts of self as a means to negotiate and apprehend a sense of vulnerability. Photographs are specifically denied exposure in a bid to assuage their haunting, traumatic presence, and in some cases narrative serves the purpose of holding such images at bay. To a certain degree narrative provides a means to unsettle that which is unsettling by framing it as distant or absent. At the same time narrative also references the ability of certain images to induce a state of precarity for the participants. This use of narrative (or even the lack of narrative in Robert’s case) frames particular accounts of self (be it an account of a pre-transition gender, or of gender ambivalence) as productive of their experience or anticipation of precariousness. In a bid to counter and grapple with a sense of vulnerability, the processes of translation and, to some extent, of censorship are drawn upon in the creation of these invisible archives. The need to censor and transform information thus reveals that an archive has both discursive *and material* consequences, hence the invisibility of images and the suppression of narratives that could render a person vulnerable.

Conceptualising the human body in an archive where visual and/or narrative accounts of bodies are conspicuously absent reveals a particular discursive-corporeal relationship that is facilitated in the participants’ archives. On the one hand, the body is cited as it is exceeded by frames of reference (such as bodily images) that can render it ambivalent or that can break with its current (gendered) frames, thus rendering a body and the life it sustains vulnerable to misrecognition or inapprehension. Conversely, the body demonstrates its ability to always be *more* than the frames it draws on for reference as it exceeds in existence and complexity the norms that surround and arise from it. In this regard the archives of the three participants reveal their bodies and lives as intricately enmeshed with frames of (in)visibility, yet these frames provide but a partial, always temporary glimpse that cannot give a ‘proper’ (i.e. conclusive, sustaining) account of such

lives. Perhaps this sign of a 'weakness', of an archival failure to sustain, is where an archive corresponds most closely to the human body – at the place where its temporary ability to support a life (or an idea of life) that is always characterised by change and, inevitably, by loss is at its most conspicuous. An archive cannot remember indefinitely and a body cannot exist forever, but they are both needed for making a life more liveable.

#### 4.4 CONCLUDING A CYCLE

At the outset of this chapter a changing line of visibility was proposed as a map for conceptualising Robert's, Charl's and Munir's personal photographic archives – a line that, I suggested, takes the form of a circle, as its beginning and end would meet at the place where their archives become invisible or barely locatable. Looking back on this cycle, a terrain was established in which various forms of archiving left their distinct or almost imperceptible impressions. Ranging from the most pronounced to the almost silent, these modes of recollection intimated parameters within which (and outside of which) three lives fall as they are brought into discourse.

The cycle of invisibility/visibility/invisibility that runs through this chapter mirrors my own experience of writing this thesis. When I started this project, the archives of the participants were largely invisible to me and I found myself at a place of anticipation as I waited for things to emerge and become comprehensible. Then, as I spent more time with these men and I gained entry into their archives, I adjusted my sight to that which suddenly appeared so visible and conspicuous – to those narratives and photographs that seemed to emerge in a clear and forceful way. The quality of certainty that these archives embodied was, however, always troubled by that which could not be visualised and to which I would always remain but an outsider. As a cisgender person, I found there are certain experiences that these trans men have had that I cannot pretend to comprehend or account for in all their complexity, and there are parts of their lives that remain invisible to me. But such a position of being an outsider is also larger than just a trans framework – as a human being, my relationship with Charl, Munir and Robert is marked by a complex enactment of exposure and concealment, with this thesis serving as one example of how I read them, how they read themselves, and also how they read me.

Perhaps this position of being at the end of a cycle and almost seeing the beginning again, of working through an archive and suddenly finding oneself at the place where one started, suggests an occasion to let things go and to loosen one's grip slightly. For it seems

as if one is walking in on oneself, seeing a person intent on writing his way through this project (focused on keeping things together, ensuring that his own archive doesn't fall apart). This signals a place of not trying to make ends meet (of bringing the cycle together perfectly), but of allowing some degree of disparity to prevail.

The participants' reading of, and commentary on, this thesis calls attention to such a process of letting go. Part of my agreement with Charl, Munir and Robert was that if they ever wanted to pull out of this project, they could do so at any time. With this in mind, this stage of inspection and commentary seemed to signal my project at its most vulnerable – if there was ever a time when these men might consider this thesis to be unjust or unworthy, this would be it. With the printed copies in their hands, they could see what I was thinking and how I was framing them, and this (I feared) might also be the place where they would decide to quit this project. Here this archive could actually fall apart.

Charl was the first participant to give feedback on the study. In general, he is pleased with the project and the way in which he is framed – he doesn't feel that I do him an injustice by my interpretation of his photographs and his narratives (Personal Interview).<sup>181</sup> Throughout our discussion the idea of two gazes converging or departing repeatedly arises – the idea of how I look at Charl, of how he responds to my gaze, and how he sees me after he has read the thesis. When asked how he feels about my perspective on his life (as nuanced and complex, in particular), he replies:

A lot happier than if I was portrayed as just being a transgender person, that somehow, because I am transgender, I am completely different; but going out there and saying "yes, I am transgender, but that doesn't make me different to the next person". You remember what Shylock said in the *Merchant of Venice*, "when you cut me I bleed", and when you slap me I feel it, I've got all these emotions that you also have, so why am I different, why am I not treated the same? (Personal Interview)

During our conversation I also ask him whether he finds this study useful, and he replies:

It made me look into myself. I don't think I looked into a camera lens, facing a camera shall I say, with any idea of what am I trying to project, and it made me have to think about the photos before I gave them to you, what are you

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<sup>181</sup> See Addendum C for a transcript of this interview.



going to see, and is that really how I feel? (Personal Interview, Charl's emphasis)

I ask Charl to elaborate on this idea of whether he sees a connection between those two viewpoints (between his presentation of self to the camera and my interpretation thereof), and he responds:

You know, it strange that you say that because I spoke to my mother yesterday or the day before and she was telling me of this photo that she came across, and the photo was of myself and my sister, and we were lying on the grass somewhere, and then she read what was written at the back, and apparently it was written by me, and on this I described the day, the date, and so on. And this was a photograph that had been taken when I was an in-patient at a psychiatric institution, and I was out for the day, and we had gone picnicking on that day. And all of this was at the back of this photograph. And I thought, maybe this is the kind of thing I should have given to you, or this is the kind of thing I should have kept on doing throughout my life; write notes on the photos on what they meant and what I saw in them at the time. You know, are people seeing what I see or what I try to project? When I read your comments on my photographs, for example, at some stage I would think "oh, did I really think that way" or "oh my word, I didn't know that this was what I was trying to say", but none of them bothered me, that "no, he is not getting the point". (Personal Interview)

These comments suggest points of connection where Charl's perspective on himself as well as my own interpretation of his life and his archive seem to intersect – in particular on his life as a *human* (and not just a gendered) being. Concurrent with my own reading of his archive, Charl's reading of this thesis also shows an acute awareness of my gaze – of how he anticipates my interpretation of his photographs (something, he admits, that informed his selection of images) and also how he, in retrospect, tries to find a connection between my reading of his photographs and his own memory of and feelings about them. What struck me about the latter attempt at finding a link between our different positions was the way in which Charl tries to access some memory of what he felt at the time when these photographs were taken – a memory that seems to be quite elusive. The repercussions of such elusive recollections are twofold; firstly, they seem to awaken in Charl a desire for a more comprehensive archive, for a system of recollection that he can draw on in order to access his own memories and feelings (a system with which he can exert and secure

himself). Photographs are not enough for accessing memories of the past, Charl's account seems to suggest, and supplementary evidence is needed – words to capture meanings and feelings and perspectives. Secondly, this failure to *remember enough* compels Charl to a certain extent to adopt my own perspective on his photographs. He does not really question my own interpretation of his images, but he cannot be completely sure if it is actually 'correct' – when looking at my reading of his photographs, Charl sometimes asks himself "did I really think that way?", but it appears as if this question is almost unanswerable as the reality that it alludes to is not completely graspable by either him or, for that matter, by me. Yet he seems to trust my opinion as he draws our different viewpoints together – at the end I seem to be "getting the point" (ibid.), or rather, I seem to be aiming at the same idea.

However, his reading of my thesis also signals an important point of departure – a place where maybe we do not see eye-to-eye. Even though Charl seems pleased with the thesis, he is concerned about the fact that his ID photograph is not included. He feels that I could have asked him to include his ID photographs in his visible archive, or at least drawn attention to the fact that they could be included. Even though this is not the purpose of the project (that is, to suggest to the participants exactly what to remember, select and include), his concern raises awareness about my own decision to frame his archive (and the other participants' archives) in a particular way – in this case, as a threshold between the visible and the invisible. At the time when I conducted the research, and also later when I wrote that particular chapter, this idea *made sense to me*. It is born out of a specific moment, and it underscores a form of delineation that is, of necessity, personal, but also temporary.

Part of this project is specifically concerned with the effect that such a conversation between researcher and participant can have, and how this project can be *more* than just personal, but perhaps also interpersonal. When asked whether there was anything that he wanted to change after he had read this thesis, Charl admitted that he would have liked to add two ID photographs. He didn't mind that they would be added in this concluding chapter, but he felt that they are necessary for the viewer to understand his process of gender transitioning and his present position as a male subject. Hence Figures C7 and C8 are added to his personal photographic archive. As Charl explains:

With my one ID, there is a lot of femininity in it, but it isn't as much as my very first ID; whereas the second, the new ID, *is me* as I am now, and I believe that photograph paved the way for me to get my ID changed, and to get the

gender markers changed. Had it not been for that, I think I would have struggled more ... these two photos speak of movement, of growth basically. I started out there, looking extremely timid, and almost scared with these *large* glasses that I had on, and a very small, thin face [Figure C7]. And then in the second image [Figure C8] my face was more formed, and I had a beard and I was balding at the top just like my father did, and it's a photograph that I am just proud to have in my pocket all the time. (Personal Interview, Charl's emphasis)

The intimacy that Charl's second ID photograph suggests, of being carried around with pride in his pocket, as well as its presence within an official document, speaks of an archive that is both dear and formal. For Charl, it seems unimaginable that this cherished image should not be included in his personal archive; yet, as he also admits, it is the very nature of this image as framed within a document that makes it unmemorable as a photograph (ibid.). Whatever the reason might be for overlooking this photograph when creating his personal archive, its inclusion here, in this chapter, resonates with the other photographs that Charl has included in his archive. Figures C7 and C8 speak of a progression towards a current male self, of "growth" and "movement", with the second image being specifically highlighted for cementing an idea of Charl as a man, as someone who is aging "just like his father did" (ibid.). Even though Figure C7 seems to suggest a more feminine appearance, it is still an image in which Charl manages to pass as male – the progression that these images thus suggest is based on appearing *more masculine* and not of moving from a feminine to a masculine extreme. What also makes this progression significant to Charl is the idea that he looks less scared in the last image; *he feels less vulnerable*. Even though I struggle to read the confidence he believes he exudes within the last picture (to me, he seems more resigned and exposed in the last image), I understand the idea that such an image that corroborates his masculinity could be experienced as empowering.

The notion of being empowered is also present in Munir's commentary on the thesis – the project made him think about ways in which he can empower himself, and also about the potential of this thesis to be used as a tool for shedding light on trans lives (an idea that was also underscored by Charl). Munir's feeling about this study is that it could be helpful for creating awareness, "because there is too little information on transgender out there, whether it is in writing or visual, and ... it is important that the word is out there, people should have a better knowledge about transgender lives" (Personal Interview).<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> See Addendum B for a transcript of this interview.

Enmeshed with such a notion of the edifying merits of this project is Munir's feeling that this study allowed him to see himself in a different light – to look “through someone else's eyes” (ibid.). When asked how it feels to see himself in such a way, Munir replies:

It is kind of emotional. I mean, when I read it there was actually a lot of emotions involved, and it is interesting to see yourself in such a thesis, to see how the photographs that you have chosen now stand there and speak of your life and your personal beliefs and things that were always private, and then someone comes and writes a different picture about you. It was interesting and also overwhelming, because maybe what I was reading was also presented in a better light than how I see myself. You know, it was like the thesis was trying to say that you should know all the facts about a person before you can actually know them, that is the message the thesis is giving to me. Because the more you do something and someone says something about it, the more you believe it, and you don't always recollect on what is happening, you just start believing whatever is said. And that is what you don't do in the thesis, it is like you are saying ‘don't judge a book by its cover’, that there is more to people than you initially know. (Personal Interview)

As Munir's discussion reveals, his reading of this thesis also seems to form part of a period of pause – of reflecting on his own life and the way in which he has been framed in the past. The idea that there is more to him than can be judged by the surface of his life and appearance seems to be particularly strong, and one that he identifies as the most important message of the thesis. This process of reading himself in relation to this text also signals a re-evaluation of his life in terms of ways that he might have changed – in Munir's opinion, he is somewhat different to the man who is portrayed in the thesis:

I think I have changed from the person you are talking about in the thesis. For me, this thesis drew attention to ways in which I can accept myself, and I think in my life I have also become a more confident person about being transgender. What your thesis emphasises is the fact that I'm more comfortable with being seen as a man, that I don't want people to see me as transgender, but since then I have learned about being empowered and embracing myself, so I don't have that hidden agenda anymore. I can go out on the streets and not be embarrassed of who I am. So the thesis sort of brought empowerment into my life, it made me realise about how I see myself. (Personal Interview)

I do not entertain the idea that this thesis can be a straightforward didactic tool, neither do I indulge the notion that I can somehow ‘enlighten’ the participants about their own lives. That being said, it does seem as if this thesis reflects a change in Munir’s perspective on himself. In his words, this thesis presented a “better” view than the one he holds of himself – the former perhaps being one that portrays him as someone who is more certain of, and comfortable with, the choices he made. This can possibly be attributed to the very structure that a thesis/archive presupposes – one according to which life and its messy contingencies appear clearer, better rationalised, more deliberate. Perhaps the enhanced view that this thesis offers can also be attributed to the idea that there is more to him than many people may know, both on a physical and discursive level, and that he is framed in complex ways – ways that he may not always have been aware of. Or perhaps it is just the feeling that he is “being appreciated” (ibid.), and it speaks of the joy of finding himself on another’s mind and in another’s words.

The idea that this study brought about a change in perspective also resonates in Robert’s feedback on the thesis. When asked how it feels to see himself in this study, he replied:

You helped me to make some links that I was finding hard to make myself – you know, a lot of those images [in his visible archive] is a performance, it’s me making a picture to the world and, interestingly enough, one of the things that I realised was that I was buying into them as well. I realised that I have actually bought into this picture, while before I had this feeling that I was trying to fool the world; but you manage to see behind that without making it an either/or, it wasn’t a polar opposite like ‘Robert is making this picture to the world, but meantime at the back he is actually just vulnerable little whatever’, a laughing clown, but you layered it and you kept it linked, which enabled me to see myself for the first time in something that somebody wrote about me, so it was great to see that link. And where I can give you a simple example of that is the photographs of myself as a woman and myself as a man – I never made that link, I never realised how I am showing myself naked twice. Can you believe I never made that link? It’s so funny how you don’t see yourself. It’s like my emotional self already knew it, but my cognitive self didn’t, so you putting it in this context linked things for me, and this is just one example, I made many more such links while I read it. (Personal Interview)<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> See Addendum A for a transcript of this interview.

The notion of creating links between different ideas, between images and narratives, and between the participants' different accounts is also something that Robert seems to find particularly valuable. In addition, Robert also highlights the process of dialogue that informs this study as an important point of departure for cisgender research on trans lives. When asked whether he found this study useful, Robert responded:

Yes, I think it is, from the stuff that I have read, and that includes international stuff, I think I would describe it as a new voice in cisgender observation of trans people. This is the way I would want cisgender people to write – with trans people. In that way I find it useful and I would definitely promote it as a tool for research, when this project is done I would want other people to read it, and I want other academics to read it – trans academics in particular. But also on a personal level I feel sorry that academic papers are sometimes so inaccessible to other people, because I feel that there is so much pouring out of you, and while I was reading this study I realised that I have been doing all this pouring out for years, and all this knowledge that I have and I am pouring it and pouring it and pouring it, and the effect of that comes back in drips. And a lot of that pouring out goes to the media, and then I always get back this bullshit and I think 'well, at least it wasn't that offensive' – that would usually be my most satisfying moment – or 'wow, the reporter says I look just like a man when I walk, well, I made it hey'. And also in academic stuff, it's often that I feel we have such a long way to go, that the stuff isn't useful to us, to trans people. I didn't feel that way with this thesis, for the first time ever I felt that somebody reflected me back to myself that helped me grow a bit. You took some of my most contrived comments and you actually interpreted them on such a layered way that I could see myself for a change. And I mean, you speak of passing as a man, and the precarity of being trans, but then I also thought 'ah, good, he sees that I am a control freak, but he also sees that I have got a goal with that'; I have a goal that forms part of my control of my own images, and that goal is not just narcissistic, it's just kind of business, that's the way it read. Those links were very important for me – the fact that you made links between the three of us and you didn't choose to not reveal those links to the reader. (Personal Interview)

Robert drew my attention to certain terms and ideas<sup>184</sup> that he feels should be included or modified (these are largely addressed within the footnotes in Chapters 1 to 4.3), but in general there is nothing within the thesis that he wants me to change. Given the content and the way in which it is presented, Robert is “very respectful of the whole thing” (ibid.). While such words assuaged my initial fears (especially as Robert was the last participant to give his feedback and, with his approval, this archive was really here and ready to be shared), something happened during our conversation that troubled me. I asked Robert a question on whether there was anything that he would like to ask me after he had read this thesis, to which he replied:

Yes, who are you? Because, like in life, your thesis also doesn't reveal much of yourself, which is probably responsible for a researcher, and it also shows you as a successful researcher because I have read many of these and then I just want to shoot them because it is all just about *them* ... I just felt that I didn't get to know you at all as a person in this thesis. I mean, I think that is my own urge, and this is academia. But at the same time, if this is the person who you are, the way that you write, then I am hoping this is the future human being – somebody who can treat people with such incredible respect, and somebody who can listen, and somebody who is perhaps not narcissistic at all. I mean, you didn't juxtapose us off yourself all the time, here and there is a nice little quip. So yes, I guess I didn't get to know you in your bad way, I didn't get to know any crap about you, which of course is what we are all hungry for, right?  
(Personal Interview)

Robert's question – “who are you?” – unsettled me. It caught me off guard, which, when I thought about it later, possibly pointed towards a feeling of being unduly guarded in the first place. Was I not open enough, was I not present enough, was it really so difficult to find me in my own text when I was constantly reading (or imagining) myself as such a pronounced presence in this thesis? I approached this project as a space where these three men could enter into dialogue with my own writing, where their own voices could emerge, albeit in a mediated manner. By no means did I ever pretend that I could be (or even wanted to be) transparent as an author; yet I never thought that I might actually be elusive.

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<sup>184</sup> For example, he drew my attention to times when I inadvertently used the term ‘transsexual’ where he would rather prefer the word ‘trans’, or to places where the term ‘experienced gender’ would be more appropriate to use (rather than ‘chosen gender’ or ‘current gender’).

Perhaps, as Robert maintains, I am just not a narcissistic person – though I very much doubt that I am free from the constraints of my own ego. In fact, my own reaction to his question counters his claim about my apparently guileless nature – I want to be *here*, conspicuous, clear as an author, I want to be present and discernible. To cite Robert's own words "I need you to see me this way", or to see something of me, at least. I want to be graspable.

To understand Robert's question better within the context of an archive, and also within our relationship as researcher and participant, I wish to recall a particular incident. During one of our meetings, Robert asked me whether he could take photographs of me – I willingly obliged as I felt that it was only fair that he should have some images of me in his possession seeing that I have access to so many of his personal photographs. An unequal trade-off I'm sure, but a gesture nonetheless – I see you and you see me, now we are both framed. Robert's question "who are you?" brought this incident to the surface, for both this question and his earlier request to photograph me seem to allude to a way of trying to know someone better – of using words and image to penetrate, open up and understand. These photographs exist in Robert's collection – I do not have access to them and, even though he showed some of them to me, I do not have them in my possession; they escape my archive. But perhaps here the camera failed, for it seems not to have managed to reveal enough. Even a photograph could not unhinge me from my elusive position as researcher, neither could it force me to give myself up – to show the 'real me', with all the "crap" and bad stuff. If there was anything that the camera could have laid bare on that day – or anything I wish, in retrospect, it would have communicated – it would be my own a fear of appearing disrespectful, ignorant or incompetent. To both the camera and to Robert's question I can only answer: *less sure than you think I am*.

I realise in retrospect that my own desire to grasp these men and to foreground their accounts possibly led me to blur myself with their stories, to try and think with them, and not against them. I am present (I feel present) in their archives for I am there, with them, when they talk; yet, as this thesis is about them, I am also on the sidelines, the spectre that haunts. Maybe I am caught up in the feeling of being an outsider who needs to keep himself in check, or it's just my own shyness. I don't know. But even then, there is a sad comfort in Robert's question – as much as I cannot fully grasp the lives of these participants, they cannot fully grasp mine. As humans we share that, while our archives speak of our constant desire to be known.



## CHAPTER 5

### A CONCLUSION

Writing a conclusion is, in some way, a means to turn oneself away from a subject – to turn one's back on something that is considered *done*, behind oneself. If conclusions were audible, they would sigh with relief. But even then, despite the imminent sense of release they might represent (of getting ready to disentangle oneself from a subject or a thesis or an archive), conclusions are also the last place for trying to comprehend. They represent the limit of an author's control – that which cannot be accounted for here has finally escaped the hold of the author, and it is either too ambivalent to reign in, or just too large to command. What an author cannot do in a conclusion, they most probably cannot do.

The sense of being in control is one that I cannot really claim ownership of. While this might be true of the general experience of writing a dissertation, the idea of *having command over one's subject* is quite important. In the context of this study the different definitions of 'subject' complicates such an understanding, for it is not only the personal archive as *subject* that is studied, but *human subjects* that are investigated. While the former implies a more passive object of scrutiny, the latter tend to be more volatile (they have lives and times and emotions of their own), and to be in command of such subjects is not viable, if not impossible. That being said, the impact of the idea (or illusion) of being in charge of this project and the manner in which it frames the research participants should not be underestimated. This idea has direct bearing on my own role as author/archivist, as the participants also invest a lot of value in my own ability to be in control – be it in terms of the information they divulge, or the way in which this thesis frames them. Even though the participants and I share an understanding that such frames are never completely within our command, we also believe that there are better (and worse) ways of being framed.

The ability to keep an archive in check has particular relevance to these participants – for them, it is not necessarily a site for easy recollection, but a place for coping with things. As an outsider, I was initially attracted to the ambiguity that surfaced in the participants' accounts of self – they seemed to represent a way for thinking about identity in an open-ended way, for *loosening things up*, so to speak. In contrast to my interest, the participants specifically tried to distance themselves from a sense of ambiguity. For them photography and narrative proved to be important mechanisms for tightening ideas of self, for pulling themselves together. What emerged during this project was that these men all have a large stake in presenting themselves in ways that seem clear and comprehensible – not

only for their own emotional wellbeing, but also for practical reasons. The way in which they represent and archive themselves have (amongst other things) socio-political repercussions that, as their accounts show, doesn't always accommodate or comprehend forms of ambivalence. The participants have to be readable as men in order to be recognisable, and their archives demonstrate how such an idea of offering oneself up for interpretation is anticipated and brought about.

To a large extent their personal archives speak of being immersed in discourse, but also of living lives that are larger, and more complex, than the words and images that are used to describe them. Such lives are made to fit into the personal archives by translating them into narrative and image. At the same time these lives are also intimated as they exceed word and image – they are *too much* to be contained in an archive, or to be completely understood. To Munir, Charl and Robert, their personal archives are both familiar and alien. They represent places where photographs and words are both like and unlike the subjects that they represent – for example, as useful as images may be for locating and supporting the 'I', so dangerous they could also be for calling forth the wrong version of self. As this study demonstrates, the intricate relationship between narrative and image allows for complex processes of (dis)identification to be facilitated in their personal archives. Words can bury an image, and can also resurrect it. A photograph can be supported by narrative frames, and it can break with such frameworks. Photographs can be lost, or made to lose, but they cannot quite be destroyed or forgotten – even in their absence, they cannot completely escape the grasp of archival practices as some traces (some memories or some words) always pull them into a mode of being or imagining.

The nature of these archives as personal spaces, as spaces where ideas of self are bodied forth, denotes particular strategies of making oneself knowable. They are intimate attempts at trying to find a common language to become social, to connect with an other. These archives are also testing grounds; they are propositions that, despite the sense of control and clarity they seem to embody, are also a bit hesitant and tentative. They allude to a need to be recognised in a certain way, rather than presenting a conclusive definition of how a person is (finally, always) being seen. These archives thus speak of the vulnerability of the human – a vulnerability that ensues from and is assuaged through visual and textual modes of representation.

Turning oneself away from these archives also allows for acknowledging other possible routes for investigation. When studying these archives, the impact of social networking sites

and the internet on modes of personal recollection are possible areas for further investigation. Alternative tools of self-representation, such as the practice of body mapping,<sup>185</sup> are also important areas of exploration, as they might offer solutions for substituting or renegotiating the scopophilic gaze of the camera. The most important future direction would perhaps be to ascertain how (and if) this study could be translated into a document that can move beyond its current parameters as a thesis. All the participants emphasise the need that this thesis should be more than a placeholder in a university archive, and a process of making their images and narratives public would rely on a collaborative effort at deciding how their stories need to be framed. Such a project would also be a suitable place for rethinking my own position as researcher/archivist, as it might allow for a more intersubjective place of recollection – Robert’s question about my presence in this text and in his archive drew my attention to other possible modes of archiving, one of them being a form of interchange where the participants have the opportunity to investigate and interpret my own photographic archive. Such a process might allow for elaborating on and transforming the researcher/participant relationship that was established in this study by tracing how ideas around gender identity, for example, impact on both cisgender and trans bodies. Perhaps then this idea of *letting go* is not completely suitable here, for it is not a matter of turning away, but rather of turning into another direction.

Conclusions speak of an intimate distance that is never far or near enough to allow for comfort or rest. Photographs haunt us long after they have become invisible. Certain words remain difficult even if we don’t use them anymore. Archives disturb us even if we don’t believe in them. Conclusions never completely release us, even though we often imagine (or hope) they will.

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<sup>185</sup> Body maps are created through a process of tracing the outline of the body onto a piece of flat surface (such as paper or cardboard), and then using painted representations and words (for example) to give expression to certain ideas and emotions. Both Robert and Charl have used body maps to represent their transition by outlining their bodies in two different poses (to create a ‘before’ and ‘after’ scenario), and then filling these outlines with words and images. They both found this practice particularly valuable, especially as it provided them with a means to visualise their transition in a way that they found less invasive than photography.

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## **Addendum A**

Robert's Archive



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**Figure A1.** Robert, *Honeymoon*.  
Digital Photograph.



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**Figure A2.** Robert, *Before*.  
Analogue Photograph.



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**Figure A3.** Robert, *As a Child*.  
Analogue Photograph.





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**Figure A4.** Robert, *Post-Surgery*.  
Digital Photograph.





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**Figure A5.** Robert, *Public Chest* [Large & Small Version].  
Digital Photograph.

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**Figure A6.** Robert, *Censored Image/Narrative*.

## Interview #1

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In conversation with Robert  
Tuesday 8 February 2011

**Ernst** *In your current ID book your name appears as 'Robert Adele', because you deliberately chose to combine your pre- and post-transition names. What motivated this decision?*

**Robert** Well, it is not something that I often swing around and I get embarrassed when people see it in my ID book. But I try to live an authentic life and it would be absurd at my age to try and delete a whole part of my past. So I decided to keep it. I think I made that decision at a time when I thought that I could maybe embrace my feminine side. But it actually played out in such a way that I don't really connect with it anymore. But I honour my previous self in this way.

I have had a suspicion since I was a child that my life would play itself out in three parts and it did happen in such a way, not precisely as I planned it in my commercial career and fine art career and my retirement when I would teach, but those three elements still played themselves out in different ways in my life. The teaching and the fine art and the commercial work happened, and I always think the next phase will start once I retire. My wife and I often talk about how we will start a new life then. You know, I don't know what will happen with me on a political level and maybe I will relax about it, but I thought that when I really stop being political about my work and when I retire I will change my name completely and leave all of that stuff behind, but now that is only a fantasy.

**E** *How important is your ID book to legitimise your personal identity?*

**R** It is everything. You can forget about changing your body, but you have to change your ID. So when I work with other trans people I always tell them "what, you want to have operations? We first have to fix your ID". It is the most powerful thing, not an operation. It is a rite of passage; it makes you a citizen. At the beginning of my transition I didn't even think about it, but the more ambivalent I presented to people, the more I realised that I needed this thing, I wanted to have it. And you know, when your ID repeatedly gets you into trouble and cause embarrassing situations, you realise how important it is. A name is the first thing that a person has to choose; it is the first step when you start to transition, before you do anything else.

**E** *How did you choose your current name?*

**R** One day my godchild told me, before I even decided about the possibility of it [transitioning], that he saw a story about it on *Oprah* [*The Oprah Winfrey Show*] and it isn't a big deal to him, so if I want to be a boy, what will I call myself? And I told him that I'm not sure about it, and he then told me that he has a second name that he doesn't use, and he asked me if I wanted to have it.

**E** *So he gave his name to you?*

**R** Yes, and my girlfriend at that time started calling me 'Robert', so it happened like that. But I think that if I really wanted to choose a name I would have liked to be 'Dawid'. I wanted to have an Afrikaans name, but it just didn't work out like that. I also wanted a name that wasn't ambivalent. I didn't want a name like 'Alex' or something along those lines where it can be male or female. I wanted to send a clear message. I also wanted something that was easy to spell. So I'm ok with 'Robert' – nobody ever asks me how to spell it.

**E** *Are there people who still call you 'Adele'?*

**R** My brother, with whom I'm not friends at all, and who have never seen me since my transition. He will call me every now and then and he will say "Adele", and I will usually respond "no, it's Robert", which is then his opportunity to look for trouble, so he will say "you are Adele and you will always be Adele". At the beginning I argued with him, but now I just say "yes, it is like that in my ID document, so you are actually right" and that shuts him up. But he uses it as a tool to humiliate me. My mother also says it when she gets emotional. I gave her permission to use it, but she resists it – it is her counter-resistance. When I tell her "I don't care, you can call me Adele, you know who I am" she just says "no, I like your new name and I have to get it right". Also my medical aid, when they send letters and e-mails, they say "dear Robert Adele" and it really irritates me, but what can you do.

**E** *Would you say that there is a difference between your approach to photography as Adele and your current approach as Robert?*

**R** I think that would be an easy trap to fall into and I believe one shouldn't do that. I think my work is informed by my current experiences. I think that the only place where I can possibly fall into that trap is maybe during my transition period when I lived a totally cognitive life, and I completely distanced myself from my body and intuition. There are people who believe that women look inward and men look outward, but I think I have always done both. So, no, but I can tell you that I haven't created a cohesive body of work since I have transitioned hormonally. So make that a dot dot dot – by the time your thesis is out I have maybe produced something.

**E** *Before your transition you identified as a lesbian woman. How strong was your association with this identity?*

**R** I was previously very political, so I was happy with it. There are a lot of women who don't like the title, but I didn't have issues with it. I felt that it didn't fit me, but I also felt that it is politically important that people call themselves 'lesbians', and I therefore used it in public and in the media.

**E** *You also identified as a feminist – how did it influence your decision to transition?*

**R** Well, I constantly had to explain myself to feminists and I was irritated with it because I usually got negative input from them. But it also gave me the opportunity to develop a strong position about my transition, and to understand patriarchy better from this position. At that time I distanced myself from feminists and thought “fuck them, I don’t need their approval to be a feminist”, and I formulated a my own ideas around women not being equal to men, and I wanted to change that, and I think that anyone that believes in that should be able to call herself or *himself* a feminist. So I formulated something that it wasn’t an easy, cool, academic position, but something really personal. And I started to understand patriarchy better, because I realised that patriarchy also doesn’t benefit all men, it benefits *some men*. I realised that, in general, men buck under that pressure too. It’s this constant provider thing, and men feel that they aren’t good enough, and there is competitiveness amongst men. It therefore became personal to me on a masculine level, and where I could inform other men in my environment – places where men are afraid to talk about feminism, afraid to talk with feminists or afraid to call themselves feminists. So it changed my variety of feminism. In that process of rejection from other feminists, I could also help other young men that are in a similar position to steel themselves against feminists and to develop their own positions, and I could tell them that it is entirely their own choice: if you don’t want to be a feminist, don’t feel pressured to be one just because you used to be a woman.

**E** *How did your lesbian friends react to your transition?*

**R** Well, over the last few years it [gender transitioning] has become much more prominent in South Africa, so these days lesbians have much more informed opinions, but in those days the reaction to it, in a personal circle of lesbian friends, was quite primitive in the sense that they reacted by asking “why don’t you want to be a woman?”. That was their sense of the matter, they saw it as an insult. They were like “you don’t want to be a woman, so explain yourself”. But I quickly explained to them that it is not about not wanting to be a woman, but it is about being a man, and over time all the layers about what transgender means became clear, and in their circle they had to ask themselves “do we have space for a man?”.

I mean, it’s also interesting, because I have a lot of heterosexual male friends in the entertainment industry, and most of them are either singers or actors, so the temptation is there to make stereotypes, but in truth those men are more in touch with possibilities, because they have been confronted with gender. In the theatre you have to play different gender roles, it is part of your training, so they are more open-minded about it. They were initially shocked about it, and when I entered a bathroom they suddenly didn’t want to use the urinals, and then we chatted and they only peed once I left – things like that happened. But after a while I also started using the urinals, and now it’s not an issue. And, funny enough, I thought they would start giving me advice at

the beginning of my transition, but they didn't, it was only later when I was advanced with my transition and when they became comfortable with my body space.

**E** *What advice did they give you?*

**R** One of my friends started to talk to me about sex, and he sat me down and said "I don't know if you ever had anybody that spoke to you about it, but my son had this talk, and I think it is important that you have it too". That was after I told him that the men in my family basically rejected me. And then he told me that he assumes that, with the [hormonal] treatment, I will experience a puberty that other boys experience, and I will experience the desires of a man, and *that* is really the test of a man. Then he showed me bad role models and good role models, and he told me "you will want to cheat on your wife, and it is natural, but you have to learn to separate your body from your desires, and you have to understand that your body will want to do things that do not correspond to your moral values". And that was a really valuable thing for me. Whenever I glance at a chick, he's like "I'll *bliksem* [hit] you".

**E** *Did you experience such changes in your desires and interests during your transition?*

**R** Yes, I did, and I was grateful for it. My father-in-law – he is actually my best friend – is not as open and direct because he is an old man, he is actually quite old-school, but every now and then he would grumble something about women and grumble something about a man's role and about my role towards him and towards older people. It is important to him that I like sport, and I do like sport more now than I did previously, but I am not socialised in it, so it is difficult for me. So he is constantly trying to explain rugby and cricket to me, and I am very grateful for that. And my other good heterosexual friend is my brother-in-law, and we will always hike in the mountains of Mozambique. So family and those types of relationships are very important to me. I never thought that I would have it, but it all fell into place, and it is a big part of how I construct my identity.

**E** *Would you say that you experience a difference in terms of power and social acceptance between your current position as a man and your previous position as a woman?*

**R** I think that I now have the same power as any other man – you have power in certain situations, and you don't have power in other situations because of your position. My position is that I, like any other man, is less or more man than somebody else, so it depends on where I find myself. I think in general, when I am in public and I go to shops, I can clearly remember how people reacted to me before and after [my transition], and there is three different responses: when I presented as a sexy, thin woman I had great power, because people think that you are a potential bitch and you are beautiful. Beauty is everything in such situations, beautiful people are always served first and young people are always served first. But in the time when I did not present myself as a lipstick-lesbian anymore, my power was really limited; you have to fight everywhere you go, and

at that stage I experienced another side of being lesbian, and it was shit. And the more I began to present as male, the more I saw, in shops for example, how people jump, especially if you present as heterosexual. I transitioned when I was thirty-five, and I think that as an older man you have more power, because you are the guy with money, supposedly. I don't know how other people present themselves, but I present myself strongly in such situations, I am not ashamed about it, but my wife gets shy when I present myself strongly as male. And I do things that I would never have done before.

For example, at a night market in Muizenberg there is a French guy who has this amazing stall that sells wheat-free, meat-free burgers, but he is so irritating. Every time when I buy a burger I only want a serviette, but he wants to give it to me on a paper plate, and I hate it because then I have to walk around with this paper plate and I feel camp. And he insists on the plate, and I tell him "no, I do not want a plate". He insisted again, and then I said "if you offer me a plate one more time, I will stick it up your fucking arse". My wife just walked away. "Oh, sorry sir", he said to me and gave me a serviette. And he got fright – it is a new experience to me to see how a man can be frightened of me. I also believe that women underestimate how fearful men are of them – I underestimated it when I was a woman, I never used that power. But to see how people get a fright when you lower the tone of your voice and you change your posture, that is a whole new experience for me, and I am not shy to use it. In any other situation I would think twice about it because I have never in my life been in a brawl, so I wouldn't know how to defend myself.

**E** *Did you deliberately study people's body language while you transitioned?*

**R** I did before the treatment started, but when the testosterone kicked in, my body entered a space where I sometimes got a fright. I saw myself in reflections where my masculinity was very visible, but where I also saw my own femininity, and I really liked that. Quite often at Genderdynamix [a local trans advocacy and support group] and with friends I would be teased that my wrists are too limp and that I sit with my legs crossed, but I am now at an age where I happily explore that type of identity. Maybe I'm a bit more sophisticated as an older guy as I have the luxury to do so, and I am privileged because I don't have to defend myself in a masculine manner, so I let myself have all of it. You can do that if you have a hairy face.

**E** *In your opinion, how empowering is photography for trans people?*

**R** I think it is key and that it is often underestimated. I get miserable in my work because there isn't any funding available for me to do more photographic work, but there is funding for writing another bloody report. With those photographs in the *Trans* book I have done more work than with anything else. When people out there see photographs, they realise "oh, they don't have long teeth and tails". For example, the photographs of Buck Angel [a ftm adult film producer and performer] have done much more than anything that I have written. And it is all that I have as antidote to Jerry Springer and those types of depictions. I have said that I will commit myself to

three years of advocacy work behind my desk, but after that I want to do what I can to document trans people. So photographs are powerful, and it is important that a trans person takes them.

For example, go to [xxboys.net](http://xxboys.net) – it is a site by a trans man who takes photographs of transgender men. This site was so important to me. This is a guy, and it is all that he does - he takes pictures of trans guys. And he photographs them in their everyday lives, disgusting or nice. It is something to be proud about; the photography is absolutely beautiful. So, on a level of creating your identity, this is where I go and search for it – photos, not stories.

**E** *So your personal collection of images consists of photographs that you took yourself and images that you get from other places, such as the internet?*

**R** Yes, absolutely. And also from online casual forums where guys post pictures of themselves. And that is very important to create your identity. This is a very macho thing to do [Robert points at image of a man injecting himself with hormones]. When guys say that they inject themselves, then you know they are very strong. I hate it, so my wife injects me every two weeks.

**E** *How protective is South Africa of trans people?*

**R** I think that in any grassroots situation people are keener of transsexuality than of homosexuality. I mean, I have this heterosexual model going for me – I have a wife and people say I look like a man. It is embarrassing as an activist – the whole heterosexual thing. It is also where gays get upset with us, and where they say that we are only trans because we want to follow a heterosexual life. But what I tell them is that it only works when you keep your trans status a secret. I mean, it is great in my life because I work amongst actors, but my outreach officer who lives in a township is confronted with men who want to rape his wife to show him what a 'real' man is, so heterosexual or not, he is still as vulnerable as he was when he was a woman. They want to rape him and his wife, so they have to move constantly, and he has already lived in three different townships in because he often appears in the newspaper. So there are a lot of layers, and it depends on where you are, and on what scale you are in socio-economic terms, and also how religious the people are amongst whom you find yourself.



## Interview #2

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In conversation with Robert

Thursday 12 May 2011

**Ernst** *Can you think of five words to describe yourself?*

**Robert** Hairy, rebellious, attractive, anxious, questioning.

**E** *How does your sexual orientation, gender identity and national identity relate to one another?*

**R** My sexual orientation, what will we say...I am bisexual, but I hate that word.

**E** *Why do you hate the word?*

**R** Because it insinuates that there are only two options, that I can be attracted to men or women, and I am attracted to femininity, so where do you situate that? So let's establish my sexual orientation as 'difficult'. And my gender identity is masculine, and as for my national identity, I identify very strongly as an Afrikaner. I care very much for the fact that I am an Afrikaner and that I am a Boer [an Afrikaans word for 'farmer', also used to describe Afrikaners], and I like it to call myself a Boer because I want to reclaim that word. I don't like it when Afrikaans people are ashamed of their Afrikaans status. I had my happiest years when I lived on a farm as a child with other Afrikaans people; it was a time when gender did not matter. That joviality was an incredible experience to me. When Eugene Terreblanche talks about the *rooi grond* [red earth], I know precisely what he is referring to, because that Western Transvaal earth was at my feet when I grew up, and I want to reclaim my affection for farming, and the barn and the land, and South Africa's weather, and the culture of being a Boer, but sans racism. So I see myself as a Boer, and I see myself as an Afrikaner, and I am proud of the youth of today – we have a new generation of Afrikaners that are totally different. So in this context I think that all of those things [sexual identity, gender identity and national identity] fit together in my head, because we are in a time when we can rewrite and reclaim our Boer and Afrikaans status, and fit new masculine and sexual identities within them. To me this picture makes total sense, I think it may be situated somewhere in the future, but it is a position of hope for South African men dealing with their identities. We are looking for a new identity, but at the same time we often overreact and forget all the amazing things that we have and that is why we struggle so much with our identities, because we throw things away and try to find new identities in the West instead of redrawing our existing identities. To be a trans person, and to consciously transition in public, means that you apply that constant rethinking of gender and what it means to be a man to other parts of your life and other parts of your identity. You realise that you can also reboot other things, you can also rewrite other parts, and you can

give your life new layers. So I think it taught me to question all my identities, or not to only question identity, I have always been doing that, but to resolve it.

**E** *So would you say that your identity is currently resolved?*

**R** Yes, totally. Even when I describe fluidity in my sexuality, that is resolved, it is not based on confusion. If you were to talk to another guy that doesn't have a lot of experience of trans identity – a guy in a bar, for example – his first reaction will be “wow, you are confused”, and then I will always say “no, I have just confused you, I know exactly who I am, I know in every context who I am, and I know what I like from my past, and what I can discard”.

**E** *Would you say that South Africa is a space in which you can easily visualise your identity?*

**R** I think that anything that isn't a mainstream construct is difficult to sustain. I am sitting here in an isolated room with you and currently I can only think of this context. But every day when I go out there I am questioned and contested, so it is an everyday struggle to find your way back to what you know, and to find the time to reflect. But I think that South Africa, on an idealistic level, has all these nice laws that, although they aren't always implemented, create consciousness and allow you to feel free enough to be yourself. And should someone confront you on a practical level, you have the tools to protect yourself, or to fight discrimination in society. So there are spaces where one is safe.

**E** *Can photography play a role in creating such a safe space?*

**R** Absolutely – I have used photography to find myself. For example, I did not want to photograph myself before my transition, and when I decided to transition, I started to obsessively photograph myself with my cell phone, and every day I looked at it. Trans people do it in general; I don't know how conscious they are of it. So any reflection or photos of myself helped me to see whether I am getting there or not. All the way to hormone therapy, which took two years, and also later when I had surgery, I photographed myself, and then it declined. Fewer and fewer times I took photograph of myself. And then a strange thing happened – I appeared in an article in *Rooi Rose* [a local Afrikaans magazine] and it was the first time that I allowed someone else to photograph me, and after that it [photographic self-portraiture] literally stopped. I still take the occasional photograph and then I'm like “ugh, I look so old”. Your physical transformation creates a type of acceleration in your body because estrogen creates a softness beneath the skin that makes you look younger, and many trans men who transition in their thirties experience during this short stage something that they describe as “the fountain of youth”. You look so young, and it is also at this stage that gay men frequently start to hit on you because you have this look of boyish innocence, but it passes quickly – quickly, really, one, two years – and then your phenotypic age sets in. So I am currently looking like my father did at this age.

**E** *In the context of this [the Rooi Rose] photograph, how did it feel to allow somebody else to photograph you and to depict you in a certain manner?*

**R** It was interesting how they chose my clothes for me. They wanted a certain look for their readers, and I couldn't stand it. I rather chose a specific look with a leather jacket and combat pants. It was at a certain stage in my life where the rest of the world could see me now, it was like "I struggle to see myself, I struggle to see myself, here I am, here I am!". But at that stage I was already trained, I have photographed myself so many times I know exactly when I look good.

What was interesting was that I chose the photographer, and I didn't choose her because I trusted her or something like that, but because I wanted to meet her. She has always been my role model in photography – Leana Gilles Ross. And it was an incredible experience because I didn't feel confronted by my masculinity at that stage, it was a joke between the two of us, because we are both photographers who know what a pretence our work in the industry can be, and we constantly laughed about the poses. We called them "pose 101" and "pose 102", and then she would say things like "can you do the one where you are clenching your hands under your chin", and I instantly knew, it was *that* one! We couldn't stop laughing about it, so the whole thing was a bit of a farce. It was a nice experience, I didn't feel nervous. Where I *did* feel nervous was with the stylist and the make-up person. They are people that I know and they are also clients, and it was interesting how they wanted to style me, what they saw in me. They wanted to put me in a suit and I started to get rebellious because I have fought my whole life against people who want to impose stereotypes on me, and now my own colleagues want to do this to me, so there was a bit of a scuffle about it. Then we all compromised and I said "ok, I'll try it your way, but I get to choose in the end", and in the end they got it, it's me.

**E** *How comfortable are you with sharing these images<sup>1</sup> with the general public?*

**R** I am comfortable with it. If these images have to end up somewhere else, I'll be fine with it; I will never be embarrassed about these images.

**E** *So there are certain images that you wouldn't share?*

**R** Yes, certain images are privileged. Nobody gets to own that. I have done serious censorship; I had friends who still had old photos of me, and I pursued them. When I knew that somebody linked me to a photograph or somebody told me there was an old image of me on the internet, especially of the stage when I began transitioning and had not completed my physical transition, I had serious

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring to the images that Robert showed to me before the interview out of which he made his final selection for his visible archive. While Figures A1 and A5 were some of the images that Robert showed me at this stage, Figures A2, A3 and A4 were only shown later, and they had different viewing restrictions.

fight. I have lost several friends who posted old photographs of me, like on Facebook. But I mostly won the battle [to censor old images], and I destroyed them.

On Robert's Photographic Selection for his Visible Archive

**Figure A1 ('Honeymoon')**

**Robert** This is a honeymoon photo of Sally and me. This is the only framed photograph in our home – we never frame photographs of ourselves.

**Ernst** *What does this image represent to you?*

**Robert** This is one of those milestone photographs. You will display it and you will show it to your children, and it is beautiful so I will show it on Facebook, and it is romantic because there is a sunset in the image – I mean, I set it up that way. It stands next to my bed, and it is the only framed picture in my home. To me it is a little kitsch when people put framed pictures of themselves in their home, but this is an image of which I will never tire, because it is filled with irony. It is this romantic set-up that I created and I wanted it to be representative of *the* moment, of our honeymoon. But my wife was very grumpy and she only gave me three frames, but she looked so gorgeous, and in the moment the wind also lifted her hair, which makes the photo technically perfect. But she was grumpy and she walked away after the photo was taken, and just after this images was taken we had our first moment – you see, we don't fight, we have moments.

**E** *If you can use three words to describe this photograph, which words would you use?*

**R** Perfect comes up, connected, and love.

**E** *You seem to be very aware of what this photograph is communicating and how it was constructed to communicate its specific message.*

**R** Yes, it contains the constructed truth, as well as the reality of what happened, and it amuses and entertains me.

**E** *Would you share this photograph with the public?*

**R** Yes, and I will also tell them the story.

**E** *To which degree was this image constructed for a specific audience?*

**R** Well, it is all appealing, so I would show it to anyone. It is totally constructed to be read in such a way.

**E** *Would you consider such a wedding photograph to be important as some form of confirmation of your masculinity?*

**R** Yes, absolutely. I had this amazing experience at my wedding where I clicked with the men in my family. And ever since my wedding they approach me differently – I am talking about Sally's side of the family. Before the wedding they were very nice, but since the wedding I have been invited into the fold. My mother also danced with me on my wedding, and it also changed something between us. That is *the* moment for any mother and son, so it was an amazing experience.

**Figure A2 ('Before')**

**R** This is a photograph of myself in a bathing costume; it is my pre-photo [pre-transition photo]. It has become the key example that I would use to show my pre-transition life. Somebody once accused me that I try to glamorise myself with this image, but that isn't what it represents to me. It represents a totally constructed self. Everything about this photograph is a lie. I cannot identify with that person at all, I cannot recognise myself. When I look at it, I want to laugh. It's ok now, but I feel a nervous laughter within me. I cannot recognise anything about myself. Sometime when I look at the image I can remember something about my legs, but otherwise nothing about it is familiar to me. I just look at it to remind myself how I felt before. It is a fucking photo of myself that shows how, at that stage of my life, I accomplished everything that society wants from a woman – I presented as a heterosexual woman. So it is a constructed self that I present in this photograph.

**E** *If you can use three words to describe this photograph, which words would you use?*

**R** Vomit, that how I feel when I see it, I want to vomit. Then, if I become less hysterical, I can say pretend, and then sexy.

**E** *Where do you keep this photograph?*

**R** It's a Polaroid photograph, and it is somewhere in a box. I have a fantasy of using it for an artwork. At some point, I would like to return to the Oysterbox [the setting of the image] to take a picture of myself there as I am now. But I am waiting till I am older; I want age and time to also

speak to the image so it's not just this metamorphosis, or it doesn't just talk of one metamorphosis. I would like *that* to show in the work, but I'm not ready yet. I need to be older so that it can be a story of a person, not a transsexual.

**E** *With whom would you share this image – with the general public, or with a carefully selected audience?*

**R** A very carefully selected audience, so I would never e-mail this image to someone. I would never put it on the internet. I do use it when I present lectures at universities, and when I have a particularly tough audience.

**E** *Why would you use it in such a setting?*

**R** Because people often have contrived ideas of trans people being pathetic, that they can't express gender successfully, so it illustrates the performance. It's like, I'm a guy now who lives a successful life and I am not a burden to society, and I was the same as a woman, but I just didn't feel connected performing that identity.

**E** *So there seems to be a degree of empowerment that you want to convey with this image?*

**R** Yes. But the reason I feel bad about this image is because I have memories of being a woman and being sexualised and objectified, and this image is like that, with my hand on my hip and the costume I am wearing. And when I look at that now, how exposed my body seems, it just makes me remember how uncomfortable it felt being a woman.

### **Figure A3 ('As a Child')**

**R** This is a photograph where I am a child and where I pose with my uncle and my grandmother. He is going to the army, and I am six and I wearing a gun holster. My family thought that I was just in awe of him, but now I realise that I actually wanted to be like him.

**E** *So you identified with his masculinity?*

**R** Yes. That was in the 70's when you would see boys on TV whose hair would look like that, so it wasn't about being a girl, it was about looking like American boys.

**E** *And the gun was also important for conveying this masculinity?*

**R** Yes, and I loved cowboys and that kind of thing.

**E** *Where do you keep this photograph?*

**R** This image is framed, and forms part of my wife's collection that is in her office. And I'm happy to have it up on the wall, because it affirms who I am now. That's a child expressing masculinity.

**E** *If you can use three words to describe this photograph, which words would you use?*

**R** Boy, happy, connected.

**E** *With whom would you share this image – with the general public, or with a carefully selected audience?*

**R** Anybody can see this image.

#### **Figure A4 ('Post-Surgery')**

**R** This is the first photograph of myself after surgery. This is a disgusting image, you can see my bloodstained chest and the terrible scars that were still uneven at the time, and there are still pipes coming out of my body, and there are wet spots on the sheet, so it is a little creepy. But whenever I do presentations I always tell people that this was the happiest time in my life, and the time when I was most relieved. I am relieved because I had this massive anxiety over the intellectual meaning of doing it – of altering my body with a knife, or actually of allowing someone else to do it. And it was great, I had no bad feelings afterwards, and I was so glad when I looked down at my chest; my soul experienced this feeling of relieve. I didn't feel any guilt, and I didn't worry that it was ugly. It was great. It was this combination of four years of anxiety that was so easily resolved.

**E** *Is this an image that you would share with the public, or only with a select audience?*

**R** No, it's not generally available, I don't want people to run with the image. What I often see on the internet is that people will use a photograph like this to convey a different meaning, and I don't want people to misuse this image. People should know why this is a joyous occasion.

**E** *Who took this photograph?*

**R** My wife did, with the camera on her phone.

**E** *Can you think of three words to describe this image?*

**R** Robert Hamblin Show [laughs]. Hmm, let's say gross, perfect – because it is the perfect placement of the nipples, which was such a big thing – and cool.

**E** *To which degree was this photograph constructed for an audience that you had in mind?*

**R** That why I said I want to call it the “Robert Hamblin Show” because that's my personality, to show everything. I have this need to show things, and I think it is part of that deep need to feel connected to people, but not really feeling it. And so you keep showing them your life, hoping for some affirmation. So that was part of the performance. I really felt that there was such an enormous gaze on me, everybody's big fear that they are going to cut my body, and so I wanted to show, well look at me, I'm all cut and I'm fine. You can see how I pull my hands towards myself, I'm not defensive, I'm like, *this is me*.

#### **Figure A5 ('Public Chest')**

**R** This is a photograph of one of the first times where I appeared in public without a shirt. It shows me with two other friends who also transitioned with me.<sup>2</sup> We promised each other that we will go swim together in the sea, and it was a really joyous occasion. What is important about this photograph is the rite of passage that I experienced with these two men. They are also trans guys, and we are really connected, like when we get married, the other two are the best men, so we have a strong bond. We always promised each other as we went through our transition that we would swim together in the sea one day, and this image is connected to that rite of passage. We got undressed in the car, and ran into the sea and swam together. So I had a little tripod especially for the event, and I stuck it in the sand and took this picture of the three of us.

**E** *Can you think of three words to describe this photograph?*

**R** Perfect, it was a perfect moment. Perfect and flawed. And done, it was the end of something.

*On the smaller version:*

**R** As this was the first time where I actually revealed my body, I also made a very small of this photograph so that people cannot enlarge it and see the scars. I posted it very strategically [on Facebook]. I thought about it for some time, whether I should do it or not, about all the issues people have with scars and things like that, but so many people have seen the image and said

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<sup>2</sup> While Robert showed me the original image in which he appeared with these two men, the latter were edited out of the copies that Robert gave to me.



“you look so happy there” and “it transcends everything that has happened to your body”, and I posted it for other trans men to see that one can have a nice surgery. The reason why I made it small is because people are morbidly curious about scars and stuff like that, and on the high-res picture you can see it. And I don’t want people to exploit that. I see how people use such images on the internet; it is an opportunity for them to make out as if we are fake. But I did want the public to see that I took that step, and I wanted to show my body as if I am any other oke on the beach.

### **Interview #3**

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In conversation with Robert  
Thursday 17 May 2012

**E** *Have you ever felt that you were born in the wrong-sexed body or have you ever identified with such a description?*

**R** No, when people say that they are trapped in the wrong body I find it somewhat absurd. This is me, my body is me and that is one of the lessons that I think transgender people, well, some of my friends have agreed about it, that’s one of the lessons you learn as a trans person – *you are not removed from your body*. Your body is you, so being trapped inside of it is already suggesting some kind of ethereal, spiritual idea, which is romantic enough, I suppose, that your spirit is trapped in this shell that isn’t worth much. I had to learn the worth of my body through this journey, so I never felt trapped in it. I have felt that my experience of myself is trapped in a system of society. The way I experienced masculinity didn’t always gel with the shell that is the system of gender around me. So it is a feeling of grinding inside that system and of hurting, and also of adjusting yourself to have better movement inside of the socialised system that is gender. That is another thing that I had to learn; I felt disconnected before and I think it’s a basic human desire, even if we don’t acknowledge it, to feel connected to society and to people around us and to be part of those wheels and cogs. Changing my body and the way I look gave me that privilege.

**E** *Do you feel that you have a stable identity that exists outside of cultural and societal influences, or do you think that culture and society played a role in how your identity is constructed?*

**R** I think that if you experience identity in this way where it is sometimes incongruent with people’s perceptions, what you experience and learn is that it’s never ‘either/or’. It’s never just nurture or just nature; it is based on a relationship between so many things. It’s the relationship between how you relate to your body and how society relates to your body. And those things constantly grind and shape one another, and what you are also dealing with is time. Time makes us change as well, so it’s this constant, organic thing of changing. I see how I am changing all the time. An example I

can give you is when I just started transitioning I was going after a type of hyper-masculinity, the way I dressed was all about squaring down my body so that you couldn't see I have a waist (later I discovered all men had waists), and also looking at my identity in terms of sexual orientation. But in time, I have relaxed about that as well. The other day I went out and I slipped on my wife's slip-ons, and they are full of glitter, they are shiny and they are full of flower sequence, and I just put them on my feet and went to the pizza shop around the corner. So the guy behind the counter is uber-butch, a real oke, and you will drink a beer with him while you are waiting for your pizza, and we are talking and there is a lot of back-slapping going on, and as he brings my pizza and starts dealing with the next customer, I walk away, and I see he looks at my feet, *and he changed*. He couldn't deal with me after that. I don't know what went through his head, but he doesn't like me any more. But you know what, I didn't care, I'm still walking around with those glitter shoes, in fact I walk with them as much as I can, because to me that moment was a sign of how stable I am in my perception of myself as a changing being. Six years ago I would never have touched those shoes, not only because they are feminine, but also because they showed the femininity of my feet. Now I don't care, I am what I am.

**E** *In a previous interview you also described a similar idea by saying that your identity is simultaneously fluid and resolved, that it is not either the one or the other.*

**R** But fluid is important to address because it is not fluid in the moment, as such, but fluid in how time goes by. So I have changed since you have last interviewed me. I wouldn't have worn those slippers a year ago.

**E** *Would you say that you feel more relaxed about yourself and your appearance?*

**R** Yes, it's about growing and growing older. I am not like some genderqueer people, for instance, who can flow in the moment. You get a lot of genderqueer female-bodied people like that; when they are with trans men they masculinise themselves, and when they are with gay men that are camp. I am not like that; I am in a continuum where I am open to my life and to life's experiences. So I am stable in my growth, but open to new experiences.

**E** *When you describe your identity, which term(s) to you prefer – transgender, transsexual, ftm, trans guy, trans man, or any others?*

**R** Since I am not at Genderdynamix anymore, I am not going to go into it being a whole spectrum; it is their business now. My business with myself is that I like to word 'ftm', because it acknowledges my experience. I have a female's history, I have had that socialisation, and I am acknowledging it. I moved into a male space, and I like to be acknowledged as a man, but I can't do that thing that some transsexuals do, that deep insistence that I am a man no matter what my body was before, or may still be. So that makes me nervous, that solidness. I can't to that. So I identity myself as ftm.

**E** *And if you are in a space where your status as trans is not necessarily known, how will you identify or present yourself?*

**R** As a man. I don't come out to people if it is not necessary, I'm not trying to avoid it at all costs, but I just think, what does it matter? When I do come out and confront people with all this stuff, then I am responsible for their reaction, which is sometimes just too tiring, and I don't want to do that work anymore. I just want to get on with my life. But you know, when it happens, I take the responsibility, and it is sometimes a privilege to see people's reactions.

**E** *When we last met you were still working as an activist at Genderdynamix, but you have since quit working there. Has that changed your perspective on such matters?*

**R** Yes, I don't want that to be my responsibility anymore, it's too big. That becomes your identity, you are an activist, and I don't want that identity, I want to be an artist. I mean, gender is your first identity, it's one of the first identities you ever get, you are a boy or a girl, with expectations and power and privileges attached to it. But being an artist is, after that, my most important identity, and only then comes activism. Being an artist means that I don't have to be *that* masculine, I can be curious and can express femininity.

**E** *Did you ever regard or present yourself as a boy while you were growing up?*

**R** Yes, absolutely, until my teenage years when peer-pressure and social pressure became so terrible; then I started struggling. I only expressed myself as a boy until then. It's kind of a classic textbook-case. So it lasted until I was eleven when I started menstruating and my breasts started growing.

**E** *Was it a traumatic experience?*

**R** It was terrible, it was like the end of the world. But the thing is, I also don't like that kind of discourse, because a lot of lesbians also feel that way, a lot of straight women feel that way, so I don't want to claim that for trans. Although it is often done, trans men often claim that.

**E** *So do you think that such a discourse should not be essentialised as 'typically' trans?*

**R** Yes. A lot of things happen to people, to teenage people for example when your body is changing and your gender responsibility starts, so it can be a traumatic experience for all humans. I suppose trans people just get very lonely in those times.

**E** *How important was the Harry Benjamin Protocol of Standards and Care to you before and during your transition? Did it play a positive role during your transition, or did you experience any problems because of this protocol?*

**R** It was the first thing I wanted to rebel against. Initially didn't know how to articulate it, but on an instinctive I could see how it was the state's interference, or bureaucratic interference, with the human experience and with the human body. It's a patriarchal thing, to own people's bodies and not to give them autonomy of it. It's also built around psychological evaluation, so it is implying that if you want to change your gender, you have to be insane. So it is like you are guilty until proven innocent. On a personal level and as an activist, I hated it. But there is a new *Standards and Care* that came out recently, and the old *Harry Benjamin*, the one I introduced you to, was about twenty-one pages long, and the new one is a thick book, and it is built on a patient-consent model. So the patient is leading the consultations. Yes, there are still some psychometric tests that take place, but it's the patient leading the thing. So it sounds like it's much more positive.

**E** *How important is it to you to pass as male in everyday society?*

**R** Painfully much. I don't want to feel this way, but I do. I'm so conscious of it, and then it is like, I shouldn't feel this way, I should contest this. And I can deconstruct it in the moment. But in the end, it is very important to me. It is a decision, this is who I am, and I need you to see me this way. At some point you have to say "shhht" to the feminists and "shhht" to the feminist bitch in yourself, and just be.

## **Interview #4**

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In conversation with Robert  
Saturday 18 August 2012

**Ernst** *Is there a question that you can think of that you are glad I didn't ask you?*

**Robert** Yes, you never wanted to know about my genitals. That is a whole other thesis, and I would have felt compelled to try and put it in a nutshell for the comfort of this project. But I didn't notice it in the thesis, and I thought it was very responsible of you, and obviously knowledgeable of sex and gender and bodies too to just concentrate on one thing at a time.

**E** *Is there a question that you can think of that you wish I had asked you?*

**R** Well, obviously the goal of that would be for me to insert something that I want into the thesis. Hmmm, I think maybe the opportunity for me to make definitions of transgender, transsexual, male, female. I think that might have been a good kick-off for me for discussion, which off course is part

of my whole control freak personality, and I think you are right in a much more palatable way than that controlled, linear bullshit that normally makes one fall asleep when reading such papers. And while I like that linear thing, I all the time when I am reading your stuff I think “why didn’t he start there?”, but when I got to the end today I was like, yes, you actually addressed everything, you just do it in your own style, which is a much better writing style than a scientific one. So ultimately I am just playing with the thought now, but I don’t think it lacks anything in that way.

**E** *Is there a question that you would like to ask me?*

**R** Yes, who are you? Because, like in life, your thesis also doesn’t reveal much of yourself, which is probably responsible for a researcher, and it also shows you as a successful researcher because I have read many of these studies and then I just want to shoot the researcher because it is all just about *them*. I mean, you helped me with a definitive question – I had a terrible feeling after I read most paper of the local stuff on transgender, and I didn’t always know how to articulate it, and even later when I was more educated and sussed on academic stuff, I still couldn’t put my finger on it. But as I read yours, I realised the difference between being an idiot and a genius – there always has to be extremes for me, hey [laughs] – is that most of those papers were basically criticising transgender people and they shouldn’t have been, they should have been criticising gender. I felt so accused after reading some of that stuff. What was the question again – did you hear that a lot in our recordings?

**E** *Yes, I actually did [laughs]. Is there a question that you would like to ask me?*

**R** Yes, so I just felt that I didn’t get to know you as a person in this thesis. I mean, I think that is my own urge, and this is academia. But at the same time, if this is the person who you are, the way that you write, then I am hoping this is the future human being – somebody that can treat people with such incredible respect, and somebody that can listen, and somebody that is perhaps not narcissistic at all. I mean, you didn’t juxtapose us off yourself all the time, here and there is a nice little quip. So yes, I guess I didn’t get to know you in your bad way, I didn’t get to know any crap about you [laughs], which of course is what we are all hungry for, right?

**E** *So maybe we should exchange the crap after this is done.*

**R** Yes, I want to see you drunk, I want to see your horribilities, I want to see what pisses you off [laughs].

**E** *Did you find this study useful, and can you use it in the future?*

**R** Yes, I think it is, from the stuff that I have read, and that includes international stuff, I think I would describe it as a new voice in cisgender observation of trans people. This is the way I would want cisgender people to write – with trans people. In that way I find it useful and I would

definitely promote it as a tool for research; when this project is done I would want other people to read it, and I want other academics to read it, trans academics in particular. But also on a personal level I feel sorry that academic papers are sometimes so inaccessible to other people, because I feel that there is so much pouring out of you, and while I was reading this study I realised that I have been doing all this pouring out for years, and all this knowledge that I have and I am pouring it and pouring it and pouring it, and the effect of that comes back in drips. And a lot of that pouring out goes to the media, and then I always get back this bullshit and I think “well, at least it wasn’t that offensive” – that would usually be my most satisfying moment – or “wow, the reporter says I look just like a man when I walk, well, I made it hey”. And also in academic stuff, it’s often that I feel we have such a long way to go, that the stuff isn’t useful to us, to trans people. I didn’t feel that way with this thesis, for the first time I ever felt that somebody reflected me back to myself in such a way that it helped me to grow a bit. You took some of my most contrived comments and you actually interpreted them on such a layered way that I could see *myself* for a change. And I mean, you speak of passing as a man, and the precarity of being trans, but then I also thought “ah, good, he sees that I am a control freak, but he also sees that I have got a goal with that”. I have a goal that forms part of my control of my own images, and that goal is not just narcissistic, it’s just kind of business; that’s the way it read. Those links were very important for me – the fact that you made links between the three of us and you didn’t choose to not reveal those links to the reader. So yes, I loved it, it was great.

**E** *How does it feel to see yourself in this thesis, framed as you are?*

**R** You helped me to make some links that I was finding hard to make myself – you know, a lot of those images are about a performance, it’s me making a picture to the world and, interestingly enough, one of the things that I realised was that I was buying into them as well. I realised that I have actually bought into this picture, while before I had this feeling that I was trying to fool the world. But you manage to see behind that without making it an either/or, it wasn’t a polar opposite like “Robert is making this picture to the world, but meantime at the back he is actually just vulnerable little whatever”, a laughing clown, but you layered it and you kept it linked, which enabled me to see myself for the first time in something that somebody wrote about me, so it was great to see that link. And where I can give you a simple example of that is the photographs of myself as a woman and myself as a man – I never made that link, I never realised how I am showing myself naked twice. Can you believe I never made that link? It’s so funny how you don’t see yourself. It’s like my emotional self already knew it, but my cognitive self didn’t, so you putting it in this context linked things for me. This is just one example – I made many more such links while I read it.

**E** *If there were anything that you can change now that you have read this study, what would it be?*

**R** Well, I'm very respectful of the whole thing, and I can see that you write in a way that it draws people in and catches them as opposed to a scientific study. So as a trans advocate I won't insist on things being in there. It might ruin the whole story, because it reads like good fiction as well; it's very compelling. You can read it at night in bed and the people in there become real, because you show them in their real lives; you could probably be a novelist.

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## **Addendum B**

Munir's Archive



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**Figure B1.** Munir, *Narrated Image*.



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**Figure B2.** Munir, *Untitled*.  
Digital Photograph.



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**Figure B3.** Munir, *Untitled*.  
Digital Photograph.



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**Figure B4.** Munir, *Untitled*.  
Digital Photograph.



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**Figure B5.** Munir, *Untitled*.  
Digital Photograph.

## Interview #1

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In conversation with Munir  
Monday 14 February 2011

**Ernst** *Can you think of five words to describe yourself?*

**Munir** At the moment, the first thing that comes to mind when people ask me what I think of myself is the fact that I am male, and then secondly that I am a very free person at the moment. Spontaneous, I would say. The fact that I am male means that for the last three years I have had a great sense of freedom in my life because of my change, and because of that I am a more spontaneous person, and it shows on the outside. I don't know about another two.

**E** *If you had to choose categories/names to describe your sexual orientation and gender identity, which categories/names would you choose?*

**M** At the moment, most times when I introduce myself I introduce myself as a man or a trans guy, or an ftm. And in terms of my sexuality, I would describe myself as a heterosexual man.

**E** *Have you ever used other names/categories to describe your sexual orientation and gender identity?*

**M** Before my change I was known as female, and then obviously once I started coming out I was described as a lesbian.

**E** *How does your sexual orientation, gender identity and national identity relate to one another? Would you say that South Africa is a space within which these identities can easily be visualised?*

**M** There are certain countries that have restrictions, but here, in South Africa and Cape Town and those kinds of places, it is easy for people to visualise it, because we are among the countries in which you can actually change your name, and once we change our gender we can actually change our identity, which is important. So for most of us who go through the change, we know we are recognised, legally. With that being possible here, in our country, it definitely is a more open and visual aspect in our society.

**E** *Do you collect images/photographs that somehow relate to your gender identity? If so, which images/photographs do you collect?*

**M** To be honest, it wasn't important before, but since my change I have quite a collection of pictures, because I am now what I always wanted to be, and for me it is very important to portray that. So since I started my change, I am more into pictures than I was before.

**E** *Were the images that you collected during your transition largely of yourself, or did you collect images of other people to use as a form of visual reference?*

**M** No, basically myself.

**E** *Is it important to you to see images that relate to trans identities in the media or in your everyday living environment?*

**M** Yes, it is. It doesn't encourage you because you are already encouraged by what you do, but it puts that comfort in you to see that there are others out there that are similar to you, that go through the same process. So it is definitely nice to see and hear of those things in the media since it [to transition] is a struggle for certain people. And I find that, once it is in the media, it is like a form of guidance to those out there, and it teaches them and even those that are not aware that *this* is what can happen, that there is hope and help out there. I try to put as much out there as I can for people to gain the proper knowledge of what is happening.

**E** *What media did you look at when you started with your transition?*

**M** If I knew about this years ago I probably would have done it then, like in my teens, but it was only later that I realised about the possibility of transitioning. I just happened to watch Oprah [The Oprah Winfrey Show] one day and I saw that this is happening in America when she interviewed an ftm guy, and when I saw that specific episode I could see: that is me sitting there. I could see in that guy it is *me* sitting there because that is *exactly* how I feel. Then I came out and obviously I was identified as lesbian at that time because I didn't have proper knowledge about what was going on until my gynaecologist did the research for me to find out whether there is specific facilities here in Cape Town that can assist us. With his help I came to know *Triangle Projects* [a local lbgqi advocacy and support group] and they set up an appointment, and that is how my whole process started.

**E** *Do you think that photographs can be important for describing an identity?*

**M** I used to believe that. I used to believe that you need to see a guy so you can say that is a guy, you need to see that person before you can actually say it is a person, and at this point in time and from what I have learned through my process, I would say no, you don't need visual imagery of anybody to be identified as a person. If that individual believes that he is a guy but looks like a female, we need to respect that that is a guy because that is what that individual prefers to be called. But for legal reasons I would say that it is important, but for us, now, it is not, or rather for me it is not.



**E** *So would you say that images can also be inaccurate when describing an identity?*

**M** Yes, it can be. It can create stereotypes when you deal with identities.

**E** *Have the images that you collect of yourself changed significantly if you compare contemporary images with those taken of you as a child, for example? If so, in what way?*

**M** My change was only three years ago but almost six years ago I started living out what I felt inside, because I used to hide it because of my religion and family. I was also married nine years ago for a year, and then I got divorced, but before that I had my son. But after that I thought that this is about me and I'm just going to live it out. So if you look at pictures then and you look at pictures now, there is definitely a change, a huge change [laughs].

**E** *How did your family and friends react to your transition?*

**M** The friends I had at that point of time, three years ago, I think they were more excited than me because they knew I were into female in the first place and they knew I was more like a guy than a girl, and when they eventually found out about my change, it was like "I normally see this on TV, but I have never met anybody who has ever done it". So it excited them because they got to be friends with somebody who is actually going to do it [laughs]. That was their expression. Other than that, they were quite supportive; they were there all the time.

As far as my family is concerned, I've been gone from my biological family for fourteen years. I have just recently, a year and a half ago, reunited with them. So basically I have two families – one I grew up with and my biological family – and when I eventually, three and a half years ago, came out and said "look here, I'm lesbian", that was already a shock to them, and when they just got used to it, I gave them *this* bombshell of my gender change. Obviously there was a discontinuation of familyship, for a while. She [biological mother] came around eventually, and she started talking to me again, I didn't force it on her though. I just felt that whoever I tell, I need to allow them to absorb what I am telling them, and then they need to come to their senses, whether they want to talk to me or not. What I also told people was the fact that I'm not expecting anyone to accept what I am saying to them, or accept the change that I am going through, but at least they should respect it.

As far as my biological family is concerned, my mother is not a person that expresses feelings, so it is not something that she talks about on a daily basis. Actually, she never talks about it and she still refers to me as her daughter. I will give her time until everything is complete and done, when she can see that her daughter has disappeared physically and there's a guy there now. But to me, she is the silent supportive type, like when I go to hospital she is there and she doesn't question and she does whatever a mother does when her child goes to hospital. And she takes care of my son when I am gone. So my family has come to terms with it, not 100%, but they are at a stage where they can actually sit in the same room as me, so that's quite neat.



**E** *How did your son react to your transition?*

**M** My son is eight years old right now, and I think he was about five when I told him. He was at that stage too young to understand what I was telling him, but he is at a point now where he understands. It is not something that he remembers daily, but when he does remember at least he understands and that he talks about and that he will tell other people about. I think he is getting used to it.

**E** *Do you think that there are enough images on trans identities in the South African media?*

**M** I have been here at *Genderdynamix* [a local trans advocacy and support group] since January, and I have come across a lot of things – there are DVD's, there are movies and books, there is about anything you can read about transgender people, but where I do find an absence is in the everyday media, in the newspaper that you buy everyday. You don't see it in the everyday media. What I've picked up is that these books and movies about us is more for research purposes, it is not something you can find in any shop. You find them in galleries and you find them in private places, but you don't get them in the everyday bookshop. I would have liked it and people would have understood it better if it were in the everyday newspaper. It would have provided a broader knowledge to people out there. If people would know about transgender and if they actually had a proper education about it, then they might not look at people as *you are a guy* and *you are female*, they would actually look at each individual separately, which is eventually going to make them tired so they choose the easy way out by just generalising. I feel that if the proper education were out there, people would actually go out of their houses and look at you as an individual. So I definitely think that there should be more publicity.

**E** *Trans identities are often grouped under the umbrella term 'lgbt' – do you think that some of the identities that fall under this term dominate the South African visual sphere at the cost of other identities?*

**M** From my own point of view, I would say that gay and lesbian are definitely dominating transgender identities, because people out there is more aware of gay and lesbian than they are of transgender. So to them, when they look at you and they are not sure if you are a male or a female, and you are still in that process of being in-between because you have just started with the hormones, they will either classify you as gay or as lesbian, but they are not going to come up with the term 'transgender' or 'trans guy' or 'ftm' or something of the kind. I think there is too little publicity out there, and if people get the proper education from a very young age, then it will automatically make it easier for the family of that person to deal with it. I think it will cause a lot less hatred between people. Look at myself – I have been married, I've been with a guy, I have a child, it was only after that that I was brave enough to find the proper info and go through the change. A lot of people could have been spared at that point of time.

**E** *What kind of challenges, if any, do you face as a man that you did not face as a woman, or what privileges do you experience as a man that you did not necessarily experience as a woman?*

**M** That is a tough one. Basically all my life I have done things that boys do; I used to play with marbles and ride my bike with the guys. But when I lived as a female, or should I say when I tried to make my family believe that is who I am, it was a lot more difficult because there were expectations about what you as a female should do – you should get married, you should have children and stuff like that. But now, as a guy, life is much easier. Besides for some people who are critical about it [his transition], life is generally much easier. There is not so much expected of you because you are a guy, you do not have to get married because you are a guy, you don't have to clean because you are a guy [laughs], and I think that, where people are concerned, I can portray who I am to them. I am a more open person, more vibrant, and I meet people more easily than I used to before as I used to shy away. So people actually see me now, inside out.

**E** *When and how did you choose your current name?*

**M** Once you start with your transition at Groote Schuur [a hospital in Cape Town that provides medical and psychological treatment for trans people], there is a whole process that you need to follow. They use the *Harry Benjamin Protocol*, and you have to go for three months' counselling once a week for three months. And only after the three months you are referred to a panel of doctors who will be working together on this whole process, like the plastic surgeon, the endocrinologist, and all the other doctors who are involved in the transition. Then the panel decides if they are going to work with you. When you go there for that three months you can go insane because it is the same questions just asked in different ways, but that is just for them to find out if you know what you really want.

When you start with your transition process, the first thing they ask you is "which name do you prefer?". So you come up with a name that you want to be called, and then it is up to you to implement the name. So I changed my name when I started the process. It is not legally changed yet, but that is the name I live by: 'Munir'. I am in the process of getting my identity document changed. I did it the other way around, because normally people would go for the name change first, and then they go for the gender change. But because the name that I am using now and my previous name is so similar, I decided to go for the gender change first because that was more important for me, because otherwise my name will be changed and my gender not. Even now when I walk into the bank, they look at me and ask "is this you?"; that has happened several times. Then you have to go with a letter every time saying that this is what is happening. So my name is now 'Munir', my female name was 'Munira', so there is just the difference of an 'a', and the initial is still the same. So I went for the gender change first.

**E** *So your ID document is important to function in society?*

**M** Definitely, because you go into places and they look at you, and it is very difficult because your ID says that you are female. You can't even register at the gym as male. So then you go as a female, which is difficult. Going out there and trying to find a job as a trans person without a proper ID document also makes it difficult to get a job.

## **Interview #2**

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In conversation with Munir

Friday 2 May 2011

**Ernst** *Would you say that you generally feel comfortable with photographs of yourself?*

**Munir** Actually, I don't, but I also don't feel the need to express myself. Ever since I changed, I accepted that *this* is who I am now, because this is what I wanted, and life just goes on for me, it is not something that I ponder on. Like I said to somebody else the other day, since I made the decision, I have accepted myself as a man, because before that I obviously classified myself as lesbian and so forth. I accepted myself as a man and then I just lived my life as a man, I didn't look back. And I didn't at that point think of the fact that I am a trans guy or anything of the sort. I only realised a lot of things once I started working here [at Genderdynamix] – that there is a trans society for example, because before that I never socialised with any trans people. So I really don't feel the need to express myself or go out there and say "this is my story". I don't mind sharing my story, but if it is not asked, I won't expose it.

**E** *So you don't see yourself as a 'trans guy', but rather as a 'guy'?*

**M** Yes.

**E** *Would you say that your identity is resolved?*

**M** No, not because of being trans or straight or gay and that kind of stuff; the only reason why I say "no" is because I am not going to say "yes" until my identification is going to say that I am male, which I am still waiting on. Once I get that, *then I'll know*. Just like this afternoon, for instance, it is kind of difficult, I had to go into a Vodashop [a local cell phone dealership] for Genderdynamix and I had to take my ID with, and then they look at the picture in my old ID, and there is a lot of confusion. So I would say that, so far, I feel like 70% complete, and once I get my new ID book with my new gender status printed in there, I would feel 100% complete.

**E** *So your ID document is extremely important to you?*

**M** Yes, it is.

**E** *And would you say that the photograph in your ID book might be one of the most important visual documents that you have?*

**M** Yes, definitely.

On Munir's Photographic Selection for his Visible Archive

**Figure B1 (Narrated Image)**

**E** *Do you have any photographs of yourself that you would not show to me and/or the public?*

**M** I don't think that I necessarily have images now, but there are quite a few images of my previous life that I don't want people to see.

**E** *So you won't share those images with the public?*

**M** No.

**E** *Would you share them with your family?*

**M** My family knows about them, I am not going to take that away from them, but for those who do not know, I choose not to show those type of images.

**E** *Are those images part of your family's own photographic collections?*

**M** I don't know if they have pictures of me, I really don't know, because I can remember when I was quite young I took a lot of pictures because there was a time in my life when I was gone from my biological mother, and when I left I took quite a few pictures with me. But I don't know, somehow those pictures just got lost in transit, because I have moved so many places since then. But there are quite a few that I won't show.

**E** *These images that you won't share with the general public are mostly images of yourself before your transition, or even as a younger child?*

**M** Not necessarily as a younger child, but it would definitely be of me before my transition.

**E** *What do these images communicate to you?*

**M** I think they represent something and someone that I wasn't happy with. When I look at them they remind me not that I regret what I was before, but they remind me that in that time I wasn't happy. I don't know, it is not something that I can really put into words. When I look at them, they tell me something that I weren't happy with, that is why I say "it" and "someone", because "it" is on there. "It" represents that it's a female, so then "it" makes me unhappy with the "someone" that is there.

**E** *So you distance yourself from those images?*

**M** Yes, I try to.

**E** *How do you feel about those images or how much do you like those images?*

**M** I won't say that I don't like them, I just think that it's my past, and I just want to leave it there. It is not that I have forgotten about it, it is just that I have started a new chapter in my life, so it is not something that I want to look back on.

**E** *In terms of the specific image [an ID photograph] that you have chosen to discuss, can you think of three words to describe this photograph?*

**M** Unhappy, feminine, and, when you look at that picture and you look at the eyes in that picture, there is a whole lot of confusion. So I'd say unhappy, feminine and split in two.

**E** *Was this photograph taken before your transition?*

**M** Yes, years before. I am still identified as female in my ID.

**E** *What does this image communicate to you?*

**M** It doesn't really say much besides the fact that I look very feminine in it, and because of my [Muslim] religion I am actually wearing a little scarf-thingy, which symbolises the feminine in my religion. And I still look quite young. But even then, when you look at my eyes, it's like I'm there but I'm also not there, and that is what all my pictures of that time are basically like.

**E** *So that would be the reason why you describe yourself as "someone" or "it"?*

**M** Yes, and when I look at pictures from that time and when I look at pictures from now, there is a much more happier reflection coming through.

**E** *Would you say that you find it easier to express yourself now?*

**M** Yes, definitely.

**E** *Is this evident in images of yourself that were taken after your transition?*

**M** Yes, because when I look at pictures now and when I look at pictures back then, there is like this huge difference in them, like sometimes now I feel the need to take a picture of myself, but back then I was normally just the person behind the camera.

**E** *How do you feel about sharing this image? Would you share it with family and friends?*

**M** To be honest, I don't really show pictures to family and friends, because I don't see the need to do that. But when it comes to the outside, when you go somewhere where you have to produce your ID, it kind of makes me feel awkward; it definitely makes me feel awkward. Like when you walk into a bank and show your ID, there is that confusion when they look at your ID book and they go like "what"? And it is not always a place, a private place, where you can actually just get close to one person to explain it. And sometimes they don't ask, they just ignore it, which makes you feel grateful. And that tells you that maybe there are people who know about transgender. But in general, it does make me feel awkward when I have to show people the picture [in his ID book].

**E** *Have you ever had negative reactions to this image when you displayed it in a public setting?*

**M** No, I won't say negative. People are confused, yes, and at that point it just tells me that it is people who are not aware of trans people. But, to me, nobody has been arrogant or rude about it. I went into the bank once, and obviously the woman working there was educated about transgender people, and all she asked me was when I will get my new ID. So it is good to know that there are people like that out there.

**E** *Would the new image in your ID book be something that you would share with the general public?*

**M** Yes, definitely, if and when I get it.

**E** *To which degree do you think your old ID photograph was constructed for a specific audience?*

**M** So you are asking me how much effort I put into this image?

**E** *Yes, and how much you were aware of what society wanted you to portray when this image was taken.*

**M** Oh, very much. You know, because I am Muslim I was raised in a certain way. You get raised as a boy and as a girl, and you know that girls don't do *this* and boys don't do *that*. So that is why

I had the scarf on my head, because that is part of being a female Muslim, and if I look at the clothes that I am wearing then, you can't really see it but I can remember what I was wearing then, it was a very feminine top that I was wearing then because it was expected of me, not only from society, but also from my family. I think that is part of why I am so uncomfortable in this photograph.

**Figure B2**

**M** That was someone that I met over the period of *Cape Town Pride* [a local lgbti festival], and I had quite a big interest in her. It was taken at the Pink Ball that they had during the Cape Town Pride Week. There was a light thing happening between us, but it didn't work out because she went back to Durban, and Durban and Cape Town is too far apart.

**E** *Who is the person who is holding the photographs in this image?*

**M** This was actually done on some Photoshop-thingy that I found on the internet.

**E** *So it is a digital template into which you inserted the photographs?*

**M** Yes.

**E** *Why did you choose this template?*

**M** Well, that [the subject appearing next to Munir in the photographs] was the person that I was interested in and that was the person I was dating at the time, and I wanted to show that to people. I feel good when I look at those two pictures, and maybe that template, with the hands holding the pictures, represents somebody admiring the pictures or something.

**E** *What does this image communicate to you?*

**M** That's *me*, that's a guy standing there because of the slacks and the shirt and the tie, and with the woman on my side [laughs]. That definitely describes masculinity. I'm like a man standing there, definitely.

**E** *How do you feel about this image, and how much do you like the image?*

**M** It is actually a bit of a mixed feeling for me, because I think it is just the wrong time to ask that question. But at that point of time when the picture was taken, I loved the picture, and when it was given to me it was like the best picture I have ever had, because it was of *us* being together,

looking good and stuff like that. But right now when I look at the picture there is mixed feelings because of personal reasons.

**E** *Can you think of three words to describe this image?*

**M** When I look at this one [points towards photograph on the left], I'd say happy, and when I look at this one [points towards photograph on the right], I'd say admiration. And in both, I'd say that it's more like a kind of comfort zone as well, because I'm at ease and comfortable with myself and the space that I am in.

**E** *Would this be an image that you would share with the general public?*

**M** Definitely, except for my partner that I am currently with [laughs].

### **Figure B3**

**E** *Where was this photograph taken?*

**M** This photographs was taken at Miss Cape Town Pride.

**E** *Who are the subjects with you in the image?*

**M** They are two girls from Durban, and that is the same one as in the previous picture [points towards the person on the right].

**E** *Do you like this image?*

**M** Well, I just met them and we started socialising and stuff like that, and when I took that picture I was laughing like that because Zanele [Muholi, a local photographer] took the picture and she said "you look like a tycoon"; you know, with the women all over me [laughs].

**E** *What does this image communicate to you?*

**M** This was very early in my transition – I started in January and this was like February. So this is where everything basically started for me. It opened my eyes to a lot of things where transgender people are involved; it is the first time I attended an event like that. Also, it says that I was more open to meeting new people, which I weren't before. So it actually does say a lot, because that was a big night for me.



**E** *So you would describe it as a turning point in your life?*

**M** Very much so.

**E** *Can you think of three words to describe this image?*

**M** I would say this image is a bit of an eye-opener. Over-whelmed as well, that night was quite over-whelming. And then it was also fun.

**E** *Would you share this image with the general public?*

**M** I don't know – do you think this is a picture that can be out there? I'm not sure, because sometimes I am very self-conscious about my weight, so it is not something that I easily put out there. And even though the picture symbolises a lot of things, because of my weight I would not always put a picture like this out there.

**E** *What would it mean to “put it out there”? Would it imply something along the lines of the image being circulated amongst the general public with your name next to it?*

**M** Yes, that would be it. It is for everybody to see.

#### **Figure B4**

**M** Robert took a series of these because my story was going to be in the *Genderdynamix* newsletter, and we needed a photo. So obviously he took quite a few to get to the perfect one that he wanted.

**E** *Are you happy with these images?*

**M** Yes, I am, because there is like a difference. There is also a sense of feeling good about it. I don't just take pictures for the sake of taking pictures; it must really mean something. Maybe if I see that I've done something different to myself, I'll take a picture.

**E** *In terms of finding the “perfect” image, is there one of these images that you would describe as “perfect”?*

**M** There is one that I specifically like [Figure B4]. To be honest, I am not a very photogenic person, so it was kind of difficult for Robert to get the perfect picture.

**E** *Where do you keep this image?*

**M** I keep all my images on a computer and on my external hard-drive.

**E** *What does this image communicate to you?*

**M** Well, it actually says a lot of things – it is about me just starting here [at Genderdynamix], and I was waiting for my story to go into the news, so it was like I'm actually starting to get out there. What I also like about this picture is that it is a close-up, so it shows that there is a little moustache, which is important to me. Even in the session itself when we took the pictures, the two of us had fun. It was kind of fun and difficult at the same time.

**E** *Can you think of three words to describe this image?*

**M** I would say very self-conscious, because my picture was being taken, and at the same time it was fun. And also there is a change, so I'll go with change as well; either change or I can see a difference.

**E** *To which degree was this image constructed for a specific audience that you had in mind?*

**M** I would say that it was there, at the back of my mind, that this has to be a good photo because others are going to see it. I think that was a big thing.

#### **Figure B5**

**M** This one you can compare to all the rest – this is the first one immediately after I've had my top-surgery.

**E** *Is this image quite important to you?*

**M** Yes, because I've taken this one to have a picture to see how the progression goes.

**E** *So it represents an important point for mapping your identity?*

**M** Yes, I would say so.

**E** *Would you say that such a picture provide a means to chart a process of experimentation?*

**M** Yes, definitely.

**E** *And would you say that you are experimenting with your identity in general, or more with your masculinity in particular?*

**M** I think it is more with my feeling of masculinity, you know, like if I change this or that, how I then come across. Weirdly enough, when my hair was longer, people out there recognised me as male, so on the taxi's they would call me "brother". But now, with my hair short, people see a female, because I was on the taxi the other day and this guy was referring to me as a female, and he said "girl" all the time. And I thought "ok, should I correct you or not". So at this stage it's more about experimenting, about what people's reactions would be, and about what is actually going to suit me and make me feel more masculine.

**E** *In terms of this process of experimentation, would you say that the goal is to find the most masculine version of yourself, or something that suits you best?*

**M** I would say something that suits me best.

**E** *Who took this photograph?*

**M** It was actually done in a studio, somebody else took it for me.

**E** *How do you feel about this photograph?*

**M** Well it is like, that is me.

**E** *If you had to choose three words to describe this image, which words would you choose?*

**M** It was the first one after my surgery, so it was about getting pictures of myself to show my masculinity. So that is one of the words that I would use. Besides masculinity, it is also like a beginning and an end at the same time, the beginning of a new life.

**E** *Would you share this image with a public audience, or only with a carefully selected audience?*

**M** I would show it to people, it shows me as a *man*.

### Interview #3

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In conversation with Munir

Saturday 2 June 2012

**E** *Have you ever felt that you were born in the wrong-sexed body, or have you ever identified with such a description?*

**M** Yes, definitely. I've spoken about it to my partner so many times; it is like I have always known. There is not a lot of knowledge about being trans out there; it is not like it is advertised. But since childhood, I have always known, I have always felt that I should have been a boy instead of being a girl.

**E** *So do you identify with a description that you felt like a boy or a man trapped in a female body?*

**M** Yes, definitely.

**E** *Did you ever regard or present yourself as a boy while you were growing up?*

**M** Always, always. When I was a child, the boys would play in their shorts, with bare feet, and topless – *that was me*. But obviously as I started growing up I had to start covering myself up. My clothes were always baggy, never skirts and things like that. When I was a teenager my jeans would hang, like the other boys', and I always wore a cap because it gave me that boyish look. And then, as I grew grown up, I continued dressing that way. I pretty much grew up as the opposite sex. I played marbles, always with the boys, always dressed like them, playing fighting games and things like that. Back then my family wasn't that concerned about it, they obviously didn't think that it would turn out this way, but I have always been like that. So it is basically a life story that would add up to one big picture of being a boy in a girl's body.

**E** *How important was the Harry Benjamin Protocol of Standards and Care to you before and during your transition? Did it play a positive role during your transition, or did you experience any problems because of this protocol?*

**M** Well, I experienced it in a positive way. In the beginning, they give you the whole layout of the *Harry Benjamin*, the process you have to follow, the counselling sessions, and then I was also told that I would have to wait weeks or months before I could get an appointment with the panel of doctors. I've finished in the last week of June with my counselling, and then at the beginning of July I went to Groote Schuur to see a doctor. So on the day that I went I was just supposed to see him, but he was so impressed with my appearance and the way I carry myself and he knew that the panel of doctors were getting together on that day to see other patients, so he allowed me to also

see the panel later that day, and they had this discussion and interview, and then things went from there. It wasn't as complicated for me as it is for others, mine went quite easy.

**E** *So you would describe your transition as a fairly easy process?*

**M** For me it was fairly easy, I don't know why. All the surgeries that I had happened on the basis of cancellations. The rule according to the protocol is that you wait for a year before you can think of any surgeries. When I saw the plastic surgeon on that day [the first day of counselling], I asked him if I had to wait for a year before I can go for my mastectomy, and he said "not necessarily". That was in July. So what he did was to keep my number and if he had any cancellations, if I am prepared to drop everything and come in for surgery, then he would give me the opportunity, and I said that that's fine, even if I lose my job. So this was in 2009. In the beginning of September they had a cancellation, and I went in for my mastectomy. And I only started with my hormone treatment after this. So I normally don't share my story with a group of trans people, because my story will just give people high hopes. Mine was just a fortunate situation, right up until today where I have had all my surgeries. So basically I am done with everything.

**E** *How does it feel to know that this process is over?*

**M** Well, it feels good. Now that I have everything behind my back, it's like, I have always felt like a man, but now everything is complete, I don't have to worry about it anymore. And I'm getting married to my girlfriend, and that has made a big difference. She has made me more accepting of myself; I don't have to worry about what I have on my body and what parts I don't have on my body. Also, because of her, it was easier to decide which surgery to go for and, since she is so accepting, it didn't matter to her. So marriage has definitely contributed a lot. So that is where I am heading, and marriage would be the conclusion of this process – that is where life starts.

**E** *How important is it to you to pass as male in everyday society?*

**M** I don't know if I'll describe it as important, but I do like it when people identify me as a man. There are obviously those who do know of my situation but since the beginning – and I have had a lot of conflict about this at *Genderdynamix* with the other trans men – it didn't matter to me whether people called me "he" or "she" because my appearance shows who I am. So my family is still in the "she"-mode; it will obviously take them longer than others who are not aware of my situation. So to me it is important that people who don't know me, which is everyday society, see that *this* is a man.

**E** *Do you feel that you have a stable identity that exists outside of cultural and societal influences, or do you think that culture and society played a role in how your identity is constructed?*

**M** I think I would most likely go with something I was born with, because, as I have said earlier on, I have known pretty much since childhood what I wanted to look like, and at a later stage I obviously came to realise that a male consists of this and of that. It was always, at the beginning of my process, important to me that I should have a penis because it makes me a man, but as the years went by it didn't matter to me anymore because *this* is what I have always wanted to look like, *this* is what I always presented and *this* is what people see, and I am accepted as is. But since childhood I have known what I basically wanted to look like, and who I wanted to be.

**E** *So the sense that you have a stable identity is quite strong?*

**M** Definitely.

**E** *When you describe your identity, which term(s) do you prefer – transgender, transsexual, ftm, trans guy, trans man, or any others?*

**M** Well, if I have to talk about it, then I normally describe myself as a trans man. But other than that, when I don't have to talk about it, I am just a man.

**E** *So to people in the know you would use 'trans man', and in everyday society you would use the term 'man'?*

**M** Yes. I'm just a man, I don't want to go stand somewhere and always be labelled as a trans man. I wouldn't say that I am not out there, but I don't want to be advertised out there. I would tell people my story, but I don't want to be advertised.

**E** *When I refer to your identity in the thesis, especially in combination with the other participants' identities, I refer to you as a 'trans man' – would you be comfortable with such a description?*

**M** Yes, that's cool.

**E** *Do you experience a sense of vulnerability in being trans and/or in being a man?*

**M** No, I don't really. The year when I started my process I worked at a place, and I approached the managing director of the company and I told her what I wanted to do, and I asked how it might affect me in my job, and she said that as long as she was there it wouldn't affect my job. Once I have spoken to her, she also allowed me to wear the male uniform. There were obviously people who had their objections because of religion and others who just didn't believe that what I was doing was right, but those were just general objections. And after that I worked at Genderdynamix. But I don't put myself out there unless people ask me.

**E** *So would you say that a sense or experience of being at risk is dependent on the context within you find yourself?*

**M** Yes, definitely. But other than that, people have been quite supportive of me where I have found myself. It is usually pretty much kept quiet, and people accept me as a man, and that's it.

#### **Interview #4**

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In conversation with Munir

Tuesday 14 August 2012

**E** *Is there a question that you can think of that you are glad I didn't ask you?*

**M** It's kind of tricky. Actually, no, I'm quite pleased with all the questions that you have raised, I think because it was not the normal questions that you would get from everyday society, it was quite different. I actually found the thesis very interesting and it was the first one that I was ever part of. So it was like seeing your own story through someone else's eyes, and how someone puts a new view on things, and I really enjoyed it. It made me feel that I, as a trans man, was being appreciated.

**E** *Is there a question that you can think of that you wish I had asked you?*

**M** No, I don't think so.

**E** *Is there a question that you would like to ask me?*

**M** Not really. If I should ask anything it won't be directed at your thesis, but more about what will happen after it is done?

**E** *Well, we have spoken about it in an informal manner, but I would like to take this project further, maybe as a book or in the form of journal articles, but that is something we all have to decide about once this project is done. Would you be comfortable with letting this thesis be converted into something like a book?*

**M** Yes I would, because there is too little information on transgender out there, whether it is in writing or visual and, as I have said to you, it is important that the word is out there, people should have a better knowledge about trans lives. So I think that there should be more ways to educate people about transgender, and if there were more books out there it would be great.

**E** *How useful is this study to you, and how can you use it in the future?*

**M** Well, as I said in the previous answer, I found it very useful because, to me, *that* is what the thesis is about, that it can go out there to educate people about transgender, and it can help them to be more aware.

**E** *How does it feel to see yourself in this thesis, framed as you are?*

**M** It is kind of emotional. I mean, when I read it there was actually a lot of emotions involved, and it is interesting to see yourself in such a thesis, to see how the photographs that you have chosen now stand there and speak of your life and your personal beliefs and things that were always private, and then someone comes and writes a different picture about you. It was interesting and also overwhelming, because maybe what I was reading was also presented in a better light than how I see myself. You know, it was like the thesis was trying to say that you should know all the facts about a person before you can actually know them; that is the message the thesis is giving to me. Because the more you do something and someone says something about it, the more you believe it, and you don't always recollect on what is happening, you just start believing whatever is said. And that is what you don't do in the thesis, it is like you are saying "don't judge a book by its cover", that there is more to people than you initially know.

**E** *Is there anything that you would like to change now that you have read this study?*

**M** No, not really. Well, there isn't anything that I would change, but I think I have changed from the person you are talking about in the thesis. For me, this thesis drew attention to ways in which I can accept myself, and I think in my life I have also become a more confident person about being transgender. What your thesis emphasises is the fact that I'm more comfortable with being seen as a man, that I don't want people to see me as transgender, but since then I have learned about being empowered and embracing myself, so I don't have that hidden agenda anymore. I can go out on the streets and not be embarrassed of who I am. So the thesis sort of brought empowerment into my life – it made me realise how I see myself.



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## **Addendum C**

Charl's Archive



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**Figure C1.** Charl, *Untitled*.  
Analogue Photograph.



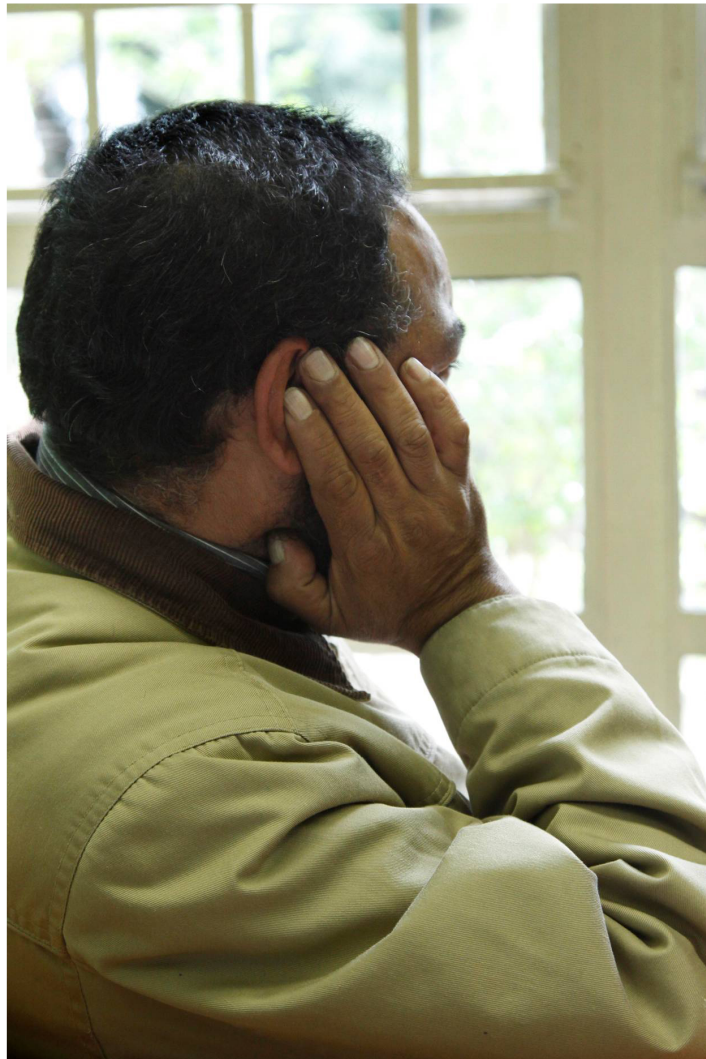
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**Figure C2.** Charl, *Untitled*.  
Digital Photograph.



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**Figure C3.** Charl, *Untitled*.  
Digital Photograph.



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**Figure C4.** Charl, *Untitled*.  
Digital Photograph.



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**Figure C5.** Charl, *Untitled*.  
Digital Photograph.

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**Figure C6.** Charl, *Narrated Image*.



a



b

a

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**Figure C7.** Charl, *Untitled*.  
Analogue Photograph.

b

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**Figure C8.** Charl, *Untitled*.  
Digital Photograph.



## Interview #1

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In conversation with Charl  
Wednesday 30 March 2011

**Ernst** *Can you think of five words to describe yourself?*

**Charl** I wouldn't say unsocial, more of a homebody. Also bit of an introvert, friendly, loyal, and hardworking.

**E** *If you had to choose categories/names to describe your sexual orientation and gender identity, which categories/names would you choose?*

**C** I'm a trans man, and heterosexual.

**E** *Have you ever used other names/categories to describe your sexual orientation and gender identity?*

**C** Before I knew that I was trans, I thought I was a lesbian, and then I found that didn't work for me.

**E** *How did you learn about trans identities? Did the media play any role?*

**C** No, what actually happened was that somebody asked whether I ever considered a sex change, and it was like a light bulb moment. It never crossed my mind that you could actually do that, and then, some years later, when I was tired of being on my own, because I didn't know other homosexuals, I got in contact with two groups. The one was *Triangle Projects* [a local lgbti advocacy and support group] and the other was the *Phoenix Group*. The *Phoenix Group* was a transvestite group, and there I heard and learnt all about transsexualism. Although they were a transvestite group they had some transsexual females, and they put me in touch with doctors and gynaecologists and psychologists who were all dealing with transsexuals, and that was 1985. I started transitioning by taking hormones, and I started with my physical transition by having a hysterectomy in 1992.

**E** *How does your sexual orientation, gender identity and national identity relate to one another? Would you say that South Africa is a space within which your identity can easily be visualised?*

**C** Not really. I can do it because I happen to pass very well, but I wouldn't think of completely outing myself, because I don't know what kind of reaction I would get, so I shy away from that. Just the fact that I have to do that means that one is not given the space in South Africa to really live

your life. If I have to tell the guys whom I am living with at the moment who I really am, they would probably kick me out.

**E** *So they don't know?*

**C** They don't know.

**E** *So the people who know are from Genderdynamix and people who are close to you?*

**C** Yes, very close to me, like my family. The friends who I had in those days, I don't have contact with them anymore for various reasons, but apart from Genderdynamix [a local trans advocacy and support group] and a few other people, very few know. My girlfriend knows, but her parents don't. I was going out with my girlfriend for six months before I told her. So I would say that one is not given the space to really live your life.

**E** *Would you call yourself an activist for trans rights?*

**C** No, I'm not really an activist. I do write a lot about transgender identity for Genderdynamix, but that is as far as my activism goes.

**E** *Do you collect images/photographs that somehow relate to your gender identity? If so, which images do you collect?*

**C** Not really, mainly because I was not terribly happy with the body I have, so I wasn't going to collect photographs of myself in a body I don't want.

**E** *You previously mentioned that you are also more comfortable with words than images?*

**C** Yes, I find it better to describe myself with words. All the photographs that I have were taken by someone else and obviously there are a lot of photographs of my life as a youngster, but in recent photographs it is always at work or at some project.

**E** *Would you say that you experience photography as an empowering or a disempowering medium?*

**C** It is a difficult one, because I like taking the odd photograph myself, but I don't think I can take a good photograph of something – I'm not good enough. So no, it is not empowering for me because it doesn't help me to express myself. I can express myself better with words. I can admire a good photograph, but I don't even know if I can read a photograph; as people say, look at a photograph to see what the photographer is trying to tell you or the subject is trying to tell you. I rather go for words.

**E** *Is it important to you to see images of trans identities in the media or in your everyday living environment?*

**C** I would say it is more a case of fine; if it is out there, it's fine.

**E** *So you rather rely on texts than images in this case?*

**C** Yes. I like an image to break the text. When I write, for example, I like a good photograph to go with the text, preferably something that tells you a little bit more about what is being written. And then I also like images of a person – if I am reading a book for example, sometimes book covers are not telling me much and I actually want a photograph of the characters that I am reading about, because I can't form any sort of image of what they look like. So I tend to go for books that have a photograph of a person on the cover.

**E** *So photographs help you to illustrate and to supplement a text?*

**C** Yes.

**E** *Do you think photographs can be important for describing a certain identity?*

**C** Yes, definitely, as long as it is done tastefully. I know Robert takes a very good photograph, for example, so I would trust him with any image; I would look at it and say "ah, *that* is what this is saying".

**E** *So do you think that a relationship of trust is very important between the photographer and the subject?*

**C** Yes, it is very important to me.

**E** *Have you ever felt exploited by photographers when they took photographs of you?*

**C** I think when I was a teenager and you had these obligatory photo sessions with the family I did, because I resented being photographed, and I was being forced to. Over the years I managed to get rid of most of them [the photographs], because it is an embarrassment even now for me to look at those photographs. So I would say yes, to a large extent.

**E** *When you speak of getting rid of the photographs, did you collect the images that were taken of you from your family and destroy them?*

**C** Not really. I might have taken some photographs, I just know that over the years they have lessened. I didn't sit with a blade or scissors and cut them up one by one. Over the years these things tend to disappear. And I'm not sure if I would take scissors to any photograph.

**E** *Why not?*

**C** I have a bit of OCD, and one of the things that I do is I hoard, so it would be heartbreaking for me to destroy something, for whatever reason. I can't do it. I have problems enough trying to get rid of cigarette boxes and matchboxes and books and papers, so I can't bother about photographs.

**E** *Have the images that you collect of yourself changed significantly if you compare contemporary images with those taken of you as a child, for example? If so, in what way?*

**C** They haven't changed in one respect – I am still very self-conscious about photographs that are taken of me. So that hasn't changed, but obviously how I dress has changed. And maybe as a very very small child I wasn't so self-conscious, but as I was growing up I was more so. So only in that respect I think I've changed.

**E** *Do you think photography is important to describe an identity?*

**C** I'm always going to choose words over photographs to describe my identity. But I don't think that you ... I am actually not very sure ... I know when I started transitioning, and when I started sporting a beard, it was very important for me that when people looked in my ID book – before it was changed – that they see it and, although my ID number haven't yet changed at that stage, it was important for them to see that *this was a male*. That was the one important thing about photographs.

**E** *It seems as if the ID book and the ID photograph are very important to be accepted in society?*

**C** Oh yes. I was fortunate, as soon as I had my hysterectomy in 1992 my names were changed in my ID, not the number though, that was changed roundabout March last year. But both those two things were very important for me. I mean, I could take the book and say "do you see here", and I actually got away with it on a number of occasions. The only places where I couldn't get away with it were places like banks; in fact it was only at banks that I had problems, until my number changed. Of all the photographs that I ever had, of all of those photographs, the one I would choose to really identify myself with is the ID photograph.

**E** *Would you mind sharing how you chose the name 'Charl'?*

**C** I wanted something with the same initial because I needed to sign my name in the same way, and a girlfriend of mine had the habit of calling me 'Careltjie' before I changed my name. And I didn't like that, so I changed it to 'Charl', and I am actually very upset because there are so many other people with that name around. So if you Google me you will see how many of us there are

out there. So that was the reason why I changed my name to 'Charl' – there wasn't any inspirational thing behind it.

**E** *Are there still people who call you by your previous name?*

**C** Sometimes my mother, but she forgets. My mother has Alzheimer's, and she doesn't always remember, and a lot of my extended family. My immediate family, they don't, they call me 'Charl', my eldest brother doesn't, but then he doesn't call me anything.

**E** *Would you say that it could be considered a form of abuse if some people deliberately call you by your previous name?*

**C** I think it is a sign of disrespect, except in my mother's case.

## **Interview #2**

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In conversation with Charl  
Tuesday 17 May 2011

### *On Charl's Photographic Selection for his Visible Archive*

#### **Figure C1 (Narrated Image)**

**E** *Who is in this photograph?*

**C** This is a photograph of myself.

**E** *Where was this photograph taken?*

**C** It was taken at my flat in Atlantis, during a period when I was quite happy and content. I was living with someone at the time, someone that I have always carried a torch for, even now. She is married, she's got children, she's a widow at the moment and we are still in contact and we are still very good friends. At one stage, I had hoped for something, but neither of us is quite there yet.

**E** *Who took this photograph?*

**C** I'm not sure actually, I know she didn't take the photograph. I think it was a friend who was a photographer for the same newspaper I was working for.

**E** *Where do you keep this photograph?*

**C** I just keep it around. It is never far away, but it is not exactly at my bedside. I just glance at it every so now and then, and it just takes me back to that time.

**E** *In the previous interview you said that you do not destroy images, that you would never “take scissors to an image”, but that some images tend to disappear. Would this be an image that you would specifically protect from accidental loss?*

**C** Yes, it is a really precious image.

**E** *What do you think this photograph communicates, and what do you want this image to say?*

**C** I think of all the images that were taken of me, I am at my happiest in this particular photograph, and I think it shows. I don't think that there has been another period like that, ever. 1985 was the last of it, and I can almost say it was a downward spiral from then on. I have picked it up since then, but I have never reached that stage again.

**E** *If you could choose three words to describe this photograph, which words would you choose?*

**C** Happy, content, and very much in love.

**E** *In terms of sharing this image, would you share this photograph with your family?*

**C** Yes, they are quite aware of it.

**E** *And they are also aware of why this image is so important to you?*

**C** Yes, yes they are.

**E** *Would you share this photograph with your friends?*

**C** Yes, I would.

**E** *Would you share this photograph with the general public?*

**C** I don't think I would have a problem with that. It is a fairly butch photograph, so I won't have a problem.

**E** *So if it was a more feminine photograph, you might not want to share it?*

**C** Yes.

**E** *So you feel that this image corresponds to your current male identity?*

**C** Yes, I do.

**E** *To which degree was this photograph constructed for an audience that you had in mind?*

**C** This photograph was specifically taken for us.

**E** *Is there any additional information about the photograph that you would like to share?*

**C** Just that, when I look at this photograph, I realise what I have lost. I can't play the guitar anymore because I hurt my left hand, so that is another reason why this photograph means a lot to me – I'll never ever hold a guitar and play it again.

**E** *So to a certain degree, this image represents a sense of loss to you?*

**C** Yes, not only of the relationship, but also physically, for myself.

## **Figure C2**

**E** *Who is in this photograph?*

**C** It is of me.

**E** *Where was this photograph taken?*

**C** It was taken up at Fountain House [a community-based rehabilitation centre for people with psychiatric disabilities], and this photograph was taken there when I was making a farewell speech to the director at the time.

**E** *Why did you choose this image for your archive?*

**C** It is the best one I have.

**E** *Who took this photograph?*

**C** A photographer for the Fountain House album.

**E** *Where do you keep this photograph?*

**C** It is on my computer.

**E** *What do you think this photograph communicates?*

**C** Probably how serious I have become. I have become very serious in my later years, and I am not as social as I used to be. I probably would not have been at that social event if they haven't asked me to make the speech. So, I wouldn't say that I am unhappy at this stage, but I am not as happy as in the other photograph [Figure C1].

**E** *Why would you say that you are more serious?*

**C** I don't know, I guess it just came on with the years. I think in the last twenty years or so I have changed a lot. I don't party as I used to, I just sort of lost the interest in that kind of thing. I am more into books, I have always been a reader, and then also the computer and the internet.

**E** *How do you feel about this photograph and how much do you like this photograph?*

**C** Well, if I'm going onto websites like *Genderdynamix* then this is the image that I will use because it tells more about me than any other image, I think.

**E** *So this would be the image that you would use most of the time?*

**C** Yes, most of the time.

**E** *Can you think of three words to describe this image?*

**C** Serious, definitely. I guess I can say change.

**E** *So it is reflective of change?*

**C** Yes. I also think I am beginning to show my age.

**E** *In terms of sharing this image, would you share this photograph with your family, friends and/or the general public?*

**C** Yes, I would.



**E** *To which degree was this photograph constructed for a specific audience that you had in mind?*

**C** I think it was, because it was specifically taken on the day that the speech was made with me knowing that this was going into the Fountain House album, so it was very much for an audience.

**E** *Were you aware that you were going to be photographed?*

**C** Yes.

**E** *How did you feel about that?*

**C** I am always very self-conscious when photographs are taken. I wouldn't say that I was aware of when the photograph was going to be taken, I knew that photos were going to be taken, but I couldn't say that *that* was the moment that they were going to take the photograph. So, I didn't feel as self-conscious because I was busy doing something else. I don't like posing for a photograph because I don't know what to do with myself when I have to pose for one. So while I was aware that the photograph was going to be taken, I wasn't aware of when they actually took the photograph.

**E** *In the first photograph that you showed me [Figure C1] you were aware of the photograph being taken, but you also welcomed it in that context?*

**C** I didn't have a problem with it, maybe I just wasn't as camera shy as I have become. Because this wasn't a posed photograph, I felt better about it. That one [Figure C1] wasn't actually a posed photograph because we were actually having a good time at that moment, but in that case I definitely knew that the photo was being taken, and I didn't have a problem with it. If they have said to me "stand still and wait for the photograph", it [Figure C2] would definitely have been a different photograph.

### **Figure C3**

**E** *Where was this photograph taken?*

**C** Some Swedish students took this one in my room in front of my computer. Although I knew the photograph was going to be taken, I preferred not to look at the camera – I was actually looking at my computer screen. They had asked me to download something, I think it was music, so that's what I was busy doing at that moment. I think it also shows how I have aged over the last couple of years.

**E** *Were you comfortable with them taking the photograph?*

**C** Yes, as long as I didn't have to look at the camera.

**E** *Why did they take the photograph?*

**C** It was for their album that they were taking back to Sweden, so they made a disc of photographs for themselves, and they also gave me a copy. And also at the time I was doing the Fountain House newsletter, so a lot of the photographs that they took were actually for the newsletter.

**E** *Where do you keep this photograph?*

**C** I have a copy on my computer.

**E** *What do you think this photograph communicates?*

**C** I think that the fact that I don't feel uncomfortable about the photograph means that I was fairly ok about being photographed at the time. I liked the girls and they were fun to be with, and I think it shows that I was comfortable around them.

**E** *How do you feel about this photograph, and how much do you like this photograph?*

**C** When I look at it, it is very different to what I look like now, so you can see that I have aged. I think my face is rounder there than it is now.

**E** *Can you think of three words to describe this image?*

**C** I'd say comfortable, reasonably content, and maybe it's because I know this, but I am doing something that I like – I am on the computer.

**E** *In terms of sharing this image, would you share this photograph with your family, friends and/or the general public?*

**C** I think I feel ok about this photograph, so it is a photo that I wouldn't mind anybody seeing.

**E** *To which degree was this photograph constructed for a specific audience that you had in mind?*

**C** It was really, it was for their personal albums.

**Figure C4**

**E** *Who took this photograph?*

**C** It was taken by Robert, and it was for an article on night shelters. I have spent some time in a night shelter, and the article was for *The Big Issue* [a local magazine that is run by a non-profit organisation that aims to empower homeless, unemployed and socially marginalised people]. The reason why I am sitting that way is so that I was not immediately recognisable. They even used pseudonyms in the article itself. By this time I was in stealth, so I didn't want myself to be seen as part of the article – all I did was explain my experience with shelters at the time. When I look at the photograph I think that anybody who knows me would probably recognise me.

**E** *So you feel identifiable in this photograph?*

**C** Yes. I was a little bit nervous about it because I felt that someone could identify me from the photograph, and I was very worried that someone was going to recognise this as being me.

**E** *Did that happen?*

**C** Well, nobody has approached me, and I don't know how many people that I know buy *The Big Issue*.

**E** *And how much do you like this photograph?*

**C** Well, the photograph itself is not a bad photograph, but I am ambivalent about it, mainly because I needed to hide, and that doesn't sit well with me. I cannot say that I actually *dislike* the thing, but it doesn't mean as much to me as other photographs.

**E** *What do you think this photograph communicates?*

**C** That I have gone more into stealth.

**E** *So would you say that you are more into stealth now than you were then?*

**C** Yes, I have come out a little bit since working at Genderdynamix, but I'm not fully out. In fact, I think I even look fairly nervous in this photograph.

**E** *Where do you keep this photograph?*

**C** Robert has the image, and I also have a copy on my computer.

**E** *Can you think of three words to describe this image?*

**C** I'd definitely say hiding, it's not a nice photograph – in terms of the image itself and not in terms of Robert's work – and a bit nervous.

**E** *In terms of sharing this image, would you share this photograph with your family, friends and/or the general public?*

**C** I'd probably share it more with the public than with friends because a large majority of the public don't know me, so it wouldn't matter what they thought of it. But my friends, I think I would be careful of showing it to them.

**E** *Why do you think that you won't show this image to your friends?*

**C** Because it is not open.

**E** *To which degree was this photograph constructed for an audience that you had in mind?*

**C** It was because it was going into an article, so that was the audience.

**E** *Would you say that the public played a large role in the construction of this image?*

**C** Yes, I would say so.

#### **Figure C5**

**E** *Who took this photograph?*

**C** It was taken by Robert for the *Trans* book.

**E** *Where do you keep this photograph?*

**C** I have a version as it was printed in the book, Robert has the original.

**E** *What do you think this photograph communicates?*

**C** I think that for that particular day it is quite descriptive. He caught me on a good day. Also, while he was taking the photographs we were talking and joking around. And of course, the inevitable cigarette – I was surprised that he said that I should light a cigarette and that he actually used that photograph [for the *Trans* book]. He says that it is *me*. I don't know how much that says about my smoking habits.

**E** *Is there anything else that this image communicates to you?*

**C** That I am ok in my body. I'm not biting my nails there, right? It doesn't look so, because I wouldn't like to say that I am ok and then I am biting my nails. And that I am also fairly content, even happy.

**E** *Would you say that your relationship with Robert was important when taking this photograph?*

**C** Yes, I trust him with the camera. And also the fact that I didn't have to face the camera. I have a major thing about facing the camera, I feel very self-conscious and uncomfortable.

**E** *Can you think of three words to describe this image?*

**C** It's me. The image itself is a good one, I am also more open.

**E** *In terms of sharing this image, would you share this photograph with your family, friends and/or the general public?*

**C** I'd share it with anyone, except for my mother because I have a cigarette in my hand.

**E** *To which degree was this photograph constructed for an audience that you had in mind?*

**C** It was basically for an audience, for the readers of the book.

#### **Figure C6 (Narrated Image)**

**E** *Do you have any photographs that you would not show to the public, or that you might have lost or destroyed?*

**C** Yes.

**E** *Can you think of a particular image and would you be willing to discuss that image?*

**C** Yes, very feminine photographs, and there is one particular image of when I was at school when the City of Cape Town had a debutant ball, and I was one of the first princesses. That is a photograph that I would never show to anybody. I don't think anybody would even recognise me. My mother is very fond of this photograph, I think it is to remind her of what I was, and I think that is the reason why she clings to that photograph.

**E** *So your mother still has this photograph in her possession?*

**C** Yes.

**E** *What does this photograph communicate to you?*

**C** It tells me how you, especially when you are a kid, would do what your mother tells you. I don't know if it is like that in all families, but in my family you do what your mother says, whether you like it or not. I didn't like it, but there was nothing I could do about it. I don't care how many people tell you you could have said no, you can't say no, not in our family anyway. So, I get embarrassed when I see it. It should have been a nice photograph, it is with my mom and dad, and if it had been any different, it would have been seen as a very nice photograph.

**E** *In terms of sharing this image, you share this photograph with your family.*

**C** Yes.

**E** *Would you share it with friends, with a carefully selected audience or with the general public?*

**C** No.

**E** *To which degree was this photograph constructed for an audience that you had in mind?*

**C** Very much so, because that photograph, if the audience wants to go back to 1974 or 1975, they will find that photograph in *The Argus* [a local newspaper].

### **Interview #3**

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In conversation with Charl  
Wednesday 23 May 2012

**E** *Have you ever felt that you were born in the wrong-sexed body or have you ever identified with such a description?*

**C** Very much so. From a very very young age, before I even understood what it's all about. When I came to my senses, when I could understand things, I just knew that I didn't want to play with girls, I didn't want to play with their toys, I wanted to play with boys and I wanted to play with their toys. And at that stage it was just the most natural thing for me to do, to pick up a car rather than pick up a doll. So, when I realised that our sex organs were different, that's when I realised that there was a mistake, I shouldn't be having *this*, I should be having *that*.

**E** *So do you identify with a description that you had a masculine self that was trapped in a feminine body?*

**C** Yes, very much.

**E** *Did you ever regard or present yourself as a boy while you were growing up?*

**C** Yes, I did. But at that stage, you must remember, I didn't know about transgender, so I just thought that I was a very butch lesbian. My family and friends thought I was a tomboy, and I only wore dresses when it was necessary; going to school, going to church, until the church changed their policy and we could wear jeans and stuff like that. I used to go to school in jeans and change at school, so I did try and present as a boy.

**E** *How important was the Harry Benjamin Protocol of Standards and Care to you before and during your transition? Did it play a positive role during your transition, or did you experience any problems because of this protocol?*

**C** Before my transition, I didn't really know much about *Harry Benjamin*, but when I did, I would seek out doctors who have heard of it, and unfortunately in South Africa there are very few of them. But I must also say that the doctors that I *did* engage with were very eager to learn and find out more about it. So I think some of them even tried to get hold of it. I must say, I'm not disappointed with the standards of care we have in South Africa, and I think they measure quite well to the requirements of the *Harry Benjamin*.

**E** *So you experienced this document in a positive way?*

**C** Yes.

**E** *How important is it to you to pass as male in everyday society?*

**C** It is very important. For that reason I always get worried when I do decide to shave, I get worried that they might see the feminine coming through. So as far as possible, I shave very seldom because when you see the beard, you see a male. Before I got my new identity document, I was very scared to be asked to show it because of the gender markers in the ID. Fortunately, not a lot of people know of the gender markers, but at places like banks and so on, they know. It was quite embarrassing, to present as a male, but to be seen as a female. So, yes, it is very important to me.

**E** *Do you feel that you have a stable identity that exists outside of cultural and societal influences, or do you think that culture and society played a role in how your identity is constructed?*

**C** Well, when I regarded myself as a butch lesbian, it was very difficult for me to accept that because of the society and the culture in which I grew up. Being homosexual was an absolute no-no. It made me terribly rebellious, but it left me with a lot of guilt as well. When I discovered that I am not butch, that I am actually trans, it lifted a lot of the guilt for me, because now I could go through life being heterosexual and not homosexual, and heterosexual was accepted.

**E** *So a degree of acceptance is very important to you?*

**C** Yes. I'm basically in stealth, so I won't go and tell people outside the transgender community that I am a trans person. I've done it in a way, such as the book [the *Trans* publication], I've been on radio a few times where I have spoken about it, and my picture has been on TV,<sup>1</sup> so little by little, and through *Genderdynamix*, I have come out of stealth, partially. Basically, I stay in stealth because I do need to be accepted. I don't often wear casual clothes and, because jeans are too unisex, I wear something that makes people immediately see me as male. So people look at me and think that I am very formal, but actually I am not being formal, I'm just looking after myself.

**E** *In that regard, would you say that culture and society plays a large role in the way that you present yourself and the way you see yourself?*

**C** Yes, I would say so.

**E** *It seems as if you experience your work at Genderdynamix as something that is empowering?*

**C** Oh yes. Before working at *Genderdynamix*, I would never have been able to stand up in front of a group of people and tell them "I'm a trans man", I would just have stood up and said "I'm a man". And discussing something that private, or that private for me, I would never have thought of it before. But it actually felt ok.

**E** *When you describe your identity, which term(s) do you prefer – transgender, transsexual, ftm, trans guy, trans man, or any others?*

**C** I normally say that I'm a trans man when I am speaking to a group of people.

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<sup>1</sup> Charl is referring to Figure C5 – an image that has been shown on a local talk show programme.



**E** *Would that be people in the know?*

**C** Even if they are not in the know, if they are there to find out. So if I am talking of transgenderism, or my transgenderism, I refer to myself as a trans man, otherwise just as male or a man.

**E** *So in everyday society you choose to identify as a man.*

**C** Yes.

**E** *Do you see a difference between transgender and transsexual modes of identification?*

**C** My understanding is that I would be transgender transsexual, because I identify as a male, and transsexual means that I actually went through a transition.

**E** *So you see transsexual as a subcategory of transgender?*

**C** Yes. So not all transgenders are transsexual, because not all transgenders go through the full transition.

**E** *And you see yourself as a transsexual within a broader spectrum of transgender identities?*

**C** Yes.

**E** *Did refer to and study photographs while you transitioned?*

**C** I didn't really study photographs, mine or anybody else's. If any photo has been taken of me, I would check to see whether I come across as male. I did initially try and figure people out, like when I saw somebody who looked very butch to me that would be my first question – whether they are a trans man, a butch lesbian, or if they even know what they are?

**E** *So it is through your interaction with people that you got a better idea of your own identity?*

**C** Yes, I would say so.

**E** *Do you experience a sense of vulnerability in being trans and/or in being a man?*

**C** To a degree, yes. Sometimes here, for example, at home, when the post arrives, I am worried about how I am referred to in a letter. Do they say 'C.A. Marais' or 'Mister C.A. Marais' or 'Miss C.A. Marais', because some of my bank accounts are still on my old ID, and the reason why it is still on my old ID is because I haven't yet had the guts to go in and tell them I have a new ID. So yes, I do.

**E** *So it is a sense of being vulnerable because you are not recognised as the gender of your choice?*

**C** Yes.

#### **Interview #4**

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In conversation with Charl

Wednesday 18 July 2012

**E** *Is there a question that you can think of that you are glad I didn't ask you?*

**C** I think it would probably be about relationships with guys in my teen years, I'm glad you didn't ask me to talk about that.

**E** *Is there a question that you can think of that you wish I had asked you?*

**C** I think that would be about my ID book – I didn't realise at the time that the ID photos could have been used. With my one ID, there is a lot of femininity in it, but it isn't as much as my very first ID, whereas the second, the new ID, *is me* as I am now, and I believe that photograph paved the way for me to get my ID changed, and to get the gender markers changed. Had it not been for that, I think I would have struggled more.

**E** *In the thesis I give recognition to the fact that you consider such photographs to be very important. In retrospect, would you have liked it if these images were included in the thesis?*

**C** Yes, I think so. I didn't realise it meant so much to you, the fact that it wasn't used in the selection. Personally, I think it was because I didn't think I could include those images.

**E** *Is there a question that you would like to ask me?*

**C** Actually, yes. Not so much where you are going with this, it's more who are you trying to reach with this, and what difference is it going to make to me as a trans person? Is somebody out there going to read it and say "ah, now I understand it a bit better", or is it just going to be on the shelf of the library of the University of Stellenbosch?

**E** *When we started this project I said that I didn't want it to be just a thesis, I want the research to go somewhere else other than just the university's library. And I think the purpose of this project has never been to present a viewpoint that this is trans, for example, but rather to talk of particular lives, your lives, and to show such lives as nuanced and complex. I also wanted to show that there are also certain shared political and bodily discourses that impact on your lives. So I think that the argument that I am*

*trying to make is for you as a human being, not so much as a specific type of person. You happen to be trans, but that is not the main or the only narrative of your life; that is basically what I am trying to argue for. I'm not trying to typecast, that this is the typical narrative or this is the typical image – that has not really been the purpose of this thesis. Are you comfortable with such a perspective, and how do you feel about it?*

**C** A lot happier than if I was portrayed as just being a transgender person; that somehow, because I am transgender, I am completely different. But going out there and saying “yes, I am transgender, but that doesn't make me different to the next person”. You remember what Shylock said in the *Merchant of Venice*, “when you cut me I bleed”, and when you slap me I feel it; I've got all these emotions that you also have, so why am I different, why am I not treated the same?

**E** Yes, precisely. And then once this process is done we can talk of ways of taking the research further, because I think that it's going to be very important to do it as a collaborative project.

**C** Yes, I think so too. It needs to be out there somehow. I mean, it shouldn't just go to the library.

**E** *How useful is this study to you, and how can you use it in the future?*

**C** It made me look into myself. I don't think I looked into a camera lens, facing a camera shall I say, with any idea of what am I trying to project, and it made me have to think about the photos before I gave them to you, what are you going to see, and is that really how I feel?

**E** *Did you find a connection between those two viewpoints, or not always?*

**C** Hmm, you know, it's strange that you say that because I spoke to my mother yesterday or the day before, and she was telling me of this photo that she came across, and the photo was of my sister and myself. We were lying on the grass somewhere, and then she read what was written at the back, and apparently it was written by me, and on this I described the day, the date, and so on. And this was a photograph that had been taken when I was an in-patient at a psychiatric institution, and I was out for the day, and we had gone picnicking on that day. And all of this was at the back of this photograph. And I thought, maybe this is the kind of thing I should have given to you, or this is the kind of thing I should have kept on doing throughout my life; write notes on the photos on what they meant and what I saw in them at the time. You know, are people seeing what I see or what I try to project? When I read your comments on my photographs, for example, at some stage I would think “oh, did I really think that way” or “oh my word, I didn't know that this was what I was trying to say”, but none of them bothered me, that “no, he is not getting the point”.

**E** *So you don't feel that I'm doing you injustice by what I'm saying?*

**C** No, I don't.

**E** *How does it feel to see yourself in this thesis?*

**C** You know, with other studies it was often a case that I never saw them again; I never received a copy either. I never heard *anything* again. One actually likes to know what one was talking about all this time. And the last twenty years I have been the subject of quite a number of theses, and I am always trying to think “that student is studying that, and that one is studying that, and this one’s doctorate is about that”, and then you come along with photographs, and the first thing I thought was “this is unique”, it’s not just a lot of questions about my sex life and parental issues, me being transgender, my relationship with the church, because that’s what it all seemed to be about most of the time. This was now about *me*, and I had a lot more to say about the thesis itself, whereas, in most of the other theses, they would take what I said, and sometimes not get the point. But here I had a couple of photographs, five photographs that had to speak for me. In that sense it was unique, because whatever you were going to say was going to be in those photographs. So, in other words I, myself, put it out there, even if it was ten or twenty years ago, it is what I projected at the time.

**E** *So it feels as if your life is somehow distilled in those images?*

**C** Yes, they had to speak correctly for me. I’m not sure that they were the best images, because I got rid of a lot of photographs, and initially they were just those I could lay my hands on. It wasn’t a case that I especially went and looked for them, except for the one photograph with me and the guitar [Figure C1] – that was the one I took out and thought “ok, that *must* go in”, but the rest of them were basically those I could lay my hands on.

**E** *Maybe that would also be one of the reasons why your ID photograph is not part of the final selection, because you selected your photographs at a time when we didn’t really talk about or consider your ID as something that has an image?*

**C** Yes, you don’t really think of it as a photograph, I guess.

**E** *If there were anything that you can change now that you have read this study, what would it be?*

**C** It would be that I would add my ID photograph, my before photograph and after photograph, because these two photos speak of movement, of growth basically. I started out there, looking extremely timid, and almost scared with these *large* glasses that I had on, and a very small, thin face [Figure C7]. And then in the second image [Figure C8] my face was more formed, and I had a beard and I was balding at the top just like my father did, and it’s a photographs that I am just proud to have in my pocket all the time, whereas before I never walked with my ID, and I was just waiting for someone to say “let me see your ID”.

**E** *Would you like me to include those images in the thesis? I can give reference to them in the conclusion of Chapter 4 when I talk about this conversation.*

**C** Yes.

**E** *How does it feel to know that this thesis frames you as trans? Does it make you uncomfortable?*

**C** Not any more. I wouldn't have done this a few years ago. Before the *Trans* book, I don't think I would have done it.

**E** *Would you say that your experience of this book made you feel more comfortable with participating in this study?*

**C** I think the *Trans* book was a good experience, because it brought me out of stealth, or semi out of stealth. I call myself semi-stealth now, because I am out in certain areas, and in others not. Like here at home, I will never be out. So I think I am now where I need to be, and being with *Genderdynamix* has made it better, because I am with people all the time who are out, wholly and truly, and who have no problem with it. Robert would stand up on a stage and say "*I am trans*", I could never do that. But since I have been at *Genderdynamix*, I write about my own transness, I have written about my operations, I have written about my ID, and the last article will be about my treatment at Groote Schuur [a hospital in Cape Town that provides medical and psychological treatment for trans people].